
Alderamin on the Sky V
天鏡のアルデラミン
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
V
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
Illustration さんば挿
電撃文庫

Table of Contents


天鏡のアルデラミン
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
Alderamin on the Sky
V
宇野朴人
さんば挿


天鏡のアルデラミンV
Alderamin on the Sky V
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
宇野朴人
Bokuto Uno
キャラクター原案／口絵＆本文イラスト さんば挿
カバーイラスト 竜徹
電撃文庫


◆タズニヤド・ハッラー
キオカ陸軍大尉。ミアラ中尉と二人でジャン少佐をサポートする、快活な軍人。ジャンやミアラにとっては面倒見のいい兄貴分。ムードメーカーでもある。
……敵の狙いが、読めた
A l d e r a m i n o n t h e S k y
◆ジャン・アルキネクス
キオカ陸軍大佐。飛びぬけて優秀な戦略眼を持つ軍人。特異な体質で、睡眠を一切とらないゆえ、世間からは『不眠の輝将』と呼ばれる。
◆ミアラ・ギン
キオカ陸軍中尉。ハッラー大尉とともにジャン大佐をサポートする軍人。理知的で、常に沈着冷静に振る舞う。が、兄を殺したヤトリにだけは……。



A l d e r a m i n o n t h e S k
◆イクタ・ソローク
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍中尉。昼寝と徒食と女漁りが趣味で「怠け者」と陰口を叩かれているが、しばしば戦場では、その類い希な知略で戦況を覆す。
◆センパ・サザル
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍少佐
下思いの有能な軍人。北域
でイクタたちと出会って以来
れ縁のように彼らと行動を
することになる。
◆ポルミニュエ・ユルグス
帝国海軍海尉。キオカ海軍との戦いで無残な敗北を喫して、自らの愛艦・暴竜号を離れることになる。落ち込んでいるところをマシューに励まされ……。
◆ヤトリシノ・イグセム
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍中尉。旧軍閥の名家イグセム家出身で、文武両道の少女。親友イクタの怠け癖に呆れつつも、彼の才能を誰よりも理解している。
「敵はキオカだ……愚将に当たることはまずない——

Chapter 1: Before the Storm

Her earliest memory was the sound of the tides. The sound of the ocean tides entered the ears of the girl held in her mother's arms.

Shortly after learning to speak, the girl whose lullaby was the ocean learned her heritage. She realized the great sailor, Captain Garciev and his lineage to the Jurgus house, and understood what it meant to be a member of this house.

Her young mind didn't waver and decided— One day, I will be just like him.

The adults around the girl agreed with her— One day, you have to be just like him.

From that day when the girl decided on her way of life, a tsunami formed in

the sea that was her gentle cradle. Every sailor challenged the sea with their knowledge, skill and courage. These weren't things that could be gained overnight, so the girl worked hard to study under her stringent seniors. Compared to her peers, she graduated from sea apprentice period which the old sailors mocked as "human-like burden" faster than anyone else

Her first chance to shine was the training to sail a small five men sailboat. The girl steered the boat freely in the ocean, as if she was favored by the sea breeze. She needed to completely understand the structure of the sailboat, give precise instructions to the sailors and be capable of judging the wind and waves accurately to sail so splendidly. The girl easily gained the ability other sailors needed long years of experience to achieve.

Everyone said that the blood of Captain Garciev flowed in her veins. The girl nodded in agreement proudly.

And so, many people supported her rise through the rank at breakneck speed. Aside from her peers competing with her, there was a consensus in the entire navy; since she had displayed the capabilities of her heroic bloodline, she should get command her own ship as quickly as possible. "Reincarnation of Captain Garciev"— these words from an unknown source was attractive enough to strip the composure that the experienced high ranking naval officers should have.

And with the backing of her uncle, the girl was quickly assigned to the "Tyrannosaur". A year later, the ship captain Naval Commander Kutsuchi stepped back and took on the role of a supervisor, and the "Tyrannosaur" became her vessel. The mid sized ship yield great results under the command of the girl, and no one in the navy questioned her capability as a sailor again.

All that was needed was for her to experience her first battle— but during this time, from a place she didn’t expected, news came from inland.

Five youths younger than her were given the title of "Imperial Knights" for rescuing the third princess. With that as a starting point, they achieved great results in the battlefield and quickly climbed the ranks… And amongst them were members of the Igsem and Remeon house of the "The Three Loyal House", just like the girl.

The girl then looked at herself who had not even been through a battle, and for the first time since she was born, she felt a burning anxiousness.

Things shouldn’t be like this— the heroes shouldn’t be from the land, they should hail from the sea instead.

"… She is talking in her sleep."

Yatori looked at the bed behind her and mumbled. The other members of the knight order and Princess Chamille looked in the

same direction with the tea cups Haro prepared for everyone in their hands.

"She just lost her subordinates yesterday, of course she will have nightmares… Let's leave her be."

Matthew's considerate words were directed in front of him— where the pale Polminue Jurgus was lying in bed with a pained expression as she slept. Her water Sprite partner was staying beside her pillow.

Last night, Matthew brought Pommy who was wandering aimlessly on the ship back to this cabin. And so, Pommy spent the night with the female members of the knight order until now.

"Pommy-san probably only fell asleep at dawn. She didn't eat dinner last night, so I'm worried that she might fall ill."

"Yes, when a person is mentally weak, her body will weaken too…"

Haro and the Princess also shared their concern for Pommy. At this moment, Ikuta who was lying in the bed on the opposite side propped himself up with a groan.

"Ughh… The inverse of that is true too. My heart is breaking down because of the pain in my waist."

"Isn't keeping them apart your specialty? Someone who can cut off his own pinky shouldn't cry over a little bruising."

"This suits you just fine, Solork. If you can only lie down, you can't waste your energy on flirting. Alright now, the doctor didn't give you permission to get up, so just lie down."

The Princess who seemed to be in a good mood pushed him, and Ikuta could only fall back onto his bed reluctantly. It had been one whole day since his injury, and the swelling had eased. According to Haro's diagnosis, he still needed to rest a little more before he could move around freely.

"… Forget it, I can sleep however much you want me too, that’s fine by me. But the war conference will be held in an hour, it will be bad if we don’t discuss this now, right?"

"That’s true, since you can’t attend, who should go in your stead?"

Everyone aside from Ikuta looked at each other. Admiral Jurgus requested two person from the knight order to attend the urgent meeting set in an hour’s time. Since this was an important opportunity to attend an operational level meeting, they couldn’t let it slip… But Ikuta has trouble getting up from bed, so he couldn’t attend even if he wanted to.

"I wouldn’t mind attending the meeting while lying down, but they will probably just chew me out."

Ikuta said quietly as he held his partner luminous sprite Kusu to his chest. Torway wasn’t sure how serious he was being smiled awkwardly and turned to the others:

"Since we can’t send our double aces of Ik-kun and Yatori-san, then… we have to decide on Ik-kun’s replacement."

"Oh, I’m a permanent member?"

"Aside from Ikuta, you are the only one who can share your views fearlessly to the navy big shots… Torway will be best suited as the other member, right? He is from the Remeon house, so those guys from the navy will show him some respect."

"Me…? To be frank, I’m not confident in negotiations…"

The youth who was mentioned by name crossed his arms with a troubled look. At this moment, the bedridden Ikuta said:

"Like what he said himself, this work isn’t suited for him. I recommend Matthew."

"… Huh? M-Me?"

That startled Matthew who was suddenly named, even the pitch of his voice had gone higher. Ikuta explained his rationale calmly as the slightly plump youth looked at him with baffled eyes:

"Thinking about it negatively, this is just the answer from the elimination process. I'm like this, Torway isn't suited, Haro can't leave as she needs to nurse me. Since Yatori is a permanent member, then the other candidate will be you."

"E-Erm… Ikuta-san doesn't need my constant attention anymore…"

"Let's correct that part. Haro has to feed me since I can't move, so she won't be available for the meeting."

"…Yatori, it seems that Solork wants his injuries to become more serious."

"As expected of Your Highness, how about dislocating his arms? Then it would be reasonable for someone to feed him his meals."

"… Let's correct that part. I hope Haro can stay with Pol-chan, because it's better for someone to chat with her. If it was the Princess, she might be frightened. So Yatori, don't crack your knuckles anymore, please."

Ikuta crawled away on his bed, and Matthew asked again with a baffled tone:

"So I have to go…? But I'm not good with negotiations either…"

"No, you have a talent for that. Remember how we forced Viscount Hamatoll to the brink? We only discussed the brief outline ahead of time, but you managed to follow my lead. If you didn't grasp the topic and where the discussion was headed, you won't be able to do that."

"Because I just need to follow your lead…"

"We will be discussing before hand for this time too, and Yatori will be there to support you. To be honest, I really hope you can attend. Aside from Pol-chan, your knowledge of the Navy is leaps and bounds ahead of us. I think this knowledge is crucial for this war conference."

The black haired youth concluded with a smile. It wasn't certain how much of that was flattery, but being praised like that still made Matthew feel good. He thought about it, then cast his gaze to the others for confirmation.

"… That's what Ikuta says, but what do you all think? Especially you, Yatori, are you really fine with me attending this important war conference with you?"

"I have no complains, please cover my lack of knowledge when the time comes."

Yatori answered immediately with a smile, and the others also nodded. Their trust made Matthew blush, and it took him quite a bit of effort to keep a straight face.

"I… I understand. I don't know how much I can contribute, but I will give it my all."

"My dear friend Matthew, you are so reliable. But don't worry, I will set aside time for your training, so you can answer any queries."

The moment he finished, Ikuta's gaze cut through his comrades seated around him, and rest on the bed opposite him.

"Will you help us too, Pol-chan?"

"… Ugh!"

Polminue Jurgus' shoulders shuddered as the topic shifted to her even though she was lying down. Aside from Ikuta and Yatori, everyone turned back in surprise:

"You… You are awake?"

"Speaking of which, her sleep murmurings died down a while ago…"

"Ehh… Pommy-san, do you feel unwell anywhere? Please wait, I will pour you a cup of tea."

Haro picked up the teapot and cup from the floor and poured a cup. It was hard for Pommy to feign sleep anymore, so she timidly propped her body up. Haro immediately offered her the cup of steaming tea.

"Here, please have some! Careful, it's still hot!"

"Thank you…"

Matthew looked at her as she took small sips of the tea, and said quietly:

"… Drink slower, you will choke."

"Yes…"

The warmth in this short exchange made Torway opened his eyes wide. Not long ago, the tyrannical female pirate on the "Tyrannosaur" was so docile now.

Ikuta looked at the two of them with a peaceful expression and said:

"When discussing about naval tactics, an active naval officer like you is an invaluable consultant. The contents of army officers would just be empty talks, but with your input, it would become correct theories that can be put into practice."

"……"

"I hope you can give your opinions without holding back, Pol-chan. Well then, first─"

The rain brought by the west wind that had grown stronger started falling before 10 am in the morning. The flagship "Yellow Dragon" situated in the middle of the formation was surrounded by smaller boats despatched from the other vessels.

The Captains who boarded the ships with their First Officers all had dark faces. Stopping the entire fleet in order to hold an emergency meeting was enough to rob them of any optimism. And they could all see the battered "Tyrannosaur" to the flag ship's portside. It looked no different from a ghost ship after getting bombarded by the cannons on a Kioka vessel.

"Looks like everyone's here, let's begin."

More than twenty naval officers sat down around a table that had been nailed to the floor. In the corner were Yatori and Matthew, participating as observers for now. A short moment later, Admiral Erynphin Jurgus who was in the seat of honor said in a loud voice:

"You all must have seen it, correct? The [Tyrannosaur] is completely battered, and the Kioka vessel we wanted to capture shook off the pursuit of three of our ships and fled. We have confirmed a few unexpected elements in that battle, that's why I'm holding this meeting in the middle of the sea."

After the Admiral gave a brief summary, and officer raised his hand:

"… What happened to the [Tyrannosaur] during its pursuit of the enemy vessel?"

"According to reports, nothing out of the ordinary happened. If we really have to say, it's just that the Blast cannons were more powerful than we expected, and the commander of the [Tyrannosaur] was more immature than I imagined, and the tactics of the enemy ran completely contrary to our thinking—"

Admiral Jurgus suddenly stood and turned mid sentence. His eyes locked onto the mirror hanging on the wall, which was something hanging all over the ship for the admiral to check his makeup.

He walked to the mirror and stopped, his figure reflected on the spotless mirror.

"— that's all! Hmmp!"

He then attacked with a merciless headbutt to the mirror with a smile.

The shattered mirrors fell all over the floor with clanging sounds, in contrast to the room that was dead silent.

Admiral Jurgus slowly pulled back his head from the mirror and turned to his subordinates. Blood flowed down from his forehead to his chin, and the sight of that made everyone gasp— And after shedding his blood, the relax expression on the Admiral's face was gone.

"… Forget, I will conclude with just one line, I was daydreaming. But I have woken up after what I did just now, so don't worry."

"No… Can you please refrain from clearing your head in such a way…?"

Naval Commander Kanron who was standing beside him stood up with a sigh, then deftly removed the glass shards from his superior's forehead. He then took out bandages from his pocket, dabbed it in disinfectant, and secured it onto the wounds. The entire process took less than a minute.

"Really, how reckless of you… Do you know what you just did?"

"Tis but a scratch. Can you do your nagging later?"

"So you don't get it. What I mean is, unlike your rock hard face, the mirror won't repair itself…"

"I will make you share its fate, Danmier!"

Naval Commander Danmier Kanron dodged the hand reaching for him, and sat down with a nonchalant face. The thick skinned Admiral Jurgus just clicked his tongue, and returned to the conference table.

"Tchh… forget it, let’s continue. After clearing my head, there is just one thing I wish to discuss with everyone. We have confirmed that the threat of the Kioka navy is beyond our expectation, we need to drastically revise our tactical planning."

The officers straightened their backs tensely, and Naval Commander Kanron spoke again:

"Tactical planning…? I think we should deliberate the operational planning instead?"

"… What do you mean?"

"Instead of how to defeat the enemy, we should figure out if we have any chance of winning. If defeat is inevitable even before the battle, we should avoid engaging the enemy."

The room turned rowdy, and Admiral Jurgus raised a hand to silence them as he glared at his deputy:

"So before we suffer an even more terrible defeat, we should flee with our tails between our legs… That’s what you are suggesting, correct?"

"Thank you for your clear summary."

Naval Commander Kanron had the attitude of being outwardly respectful while inwardly contemptuous towards his superior who had murderous eyes. This was a common sight, but the intensity was many times stronger than normal. After a long tensed silence, Admiral Jurgus narrowed his eyes.

"… Alright then, give your explanation. After all, having a pessimistic view is your job."

"An explanation is unnecessary, everyone have already seen the power of the Blast cannons. The enemy possess them, while we don’t. We can plainly see how heavy reality is, correct?"

Naval Commander Kanron looked at the mustered officers and continued:

"For example… ten of our warships faced off against five of their Blast cannons vessels 1 nautical mile away. Our tactics would be approach until 200m before firing on them, ram into their ships, then board their ships in hand to hand combat. What about the enemy? They would start bombardment at 1 nautical mile with their Blast cannons, and stay more than 200m away from us, until all our ships are disabled."

What then? Naval Commander Kanron asked the floor. The silence was a clear answer.

"Do we have any ways of turning this around? If we can’t hit the enemy effectively, then we can’t make use of our advantage in numbers. All we can do is to endure until their ammunition run out, but how many of our ships will be left? One? Two? Let’s be optimistic and assume five… Even with that many ships, we would still be battered after being bombarded for so long. In contrast, the five enemy vessels are unscathed, and would attack us with their full might."

The simplified battle simulation allowed the officers to grasp the gulf between the enemy and themselves. Naval Commander Kanron threw his pale faced audience into deeper despair:

"Some of us might think that it is unlikely for all the enemy vessels to be equipped with Blast cannons. I agree, but we can’t be too optimistic and assume there are only a couple. Please think back to

our previous encounter. If you are the admiral of the Kioka navy, will you send such a precious ship to scout?"

His deduction was very logical. Blast cannons vessels forming up in the sea─ imagining this despairing scene sent a chill down the officers' back.

"Based on the factors I have listed, I judged that the chances of establishing sea superiority in this area is slim. I propose that the Imperial First Naval Fleet perform a tactical retreat. Gentlemen, should we run away with our tails between our legs? We should do so while we still have our tail with us."

His words shocked everyone. And the officers raised their dissension:

"Wait, wait! Given the current situation, is retreat a forgivable option? The battle to take the Hioredo ore mines is already underway. This isn't just a combined operation between the navy and army, we are also acting under Imperial Edict!"

"That's true, retreating after suffering a defeat aside, pulling out before even engaging the enemy is plain insubordination. Not only is the reputation of the Imperial Navy at stake, Admiral Jurgus will be lucky if he is just relieved of his post for this!"

Most of the officers agreed that "retreating isn't realistic". However, Naval Commander Kanron just shrugged, as if he expected such a reaction from the start.

"Hmm, what should I make of this? In order for our beloved Admiral to keep his standings, we should risk being wiped out?"

"You… Watch your tongue, Naval Commander Kanron! There are things you cannot say as his deputy─"

"No, it's fine, he made his opinion very clear."

Admiral Jurgus interjected casually as he cast a sharp gaze at his nonchalant deputy.

"… You are saying that I shouldn't let my subordinates fight a losing battle for the sake of me saving face and salvaging my standings, right?"

"Yes, I think out of the many ways to die, this is the one of the most foolish death."

Even after hearing Naval Commander Kanron's sarcastic comment, Admiral Jurgus didn't lash out, and just closed his eyes in deep thought. The other officers mimicked him and kept quiet.

Their refusal to speak freely resulted in silence engulfing the room. At this moment, a determined voice intervened:

"Pardon my insolence, Naval Commander Kanron. For this situation, we aren't weighing the risk of battle with just Admiral Jurgus' reputation and standings."

Everyone looked towards the unexpected speaker. The girl with vermillion hair cast a strong gaze towards Naval Commander Kanron from the opposite end of the long table.

"Compared to other issues, the first priority should be other friendly forces participating in this operation. If we retreat in order to avoid engagement, they will lose their reinforcements and resupplies. That will inadvertently lead to them taking more losses in the coming battles."

"… Yes, First Lieutenant Yatori Shino, it is as you say. We have no intention of deserting our allies on the land and fleeing either."

Judging that his debate opponent had changed, Naval Commander Kanron showed a refreshing smile towards Yatori.

"I'm proposing retreat, but that only means [avoid engaging the enemy in the designated area]. Maybe it will be easier to understand if

I change it to [The landing point will be adjusted further to the west]? This was already worked into out plans, as the [backup strategy should we lose the naval battle], so the army must have made the corresponding arrangements. The reinforcements and supplies will be sent by an alternate route, so don't worry."

"Is that really the case? Thinking about it carefully, the main objective of this operation is to take the Hioredo ore mines. It is very likely that Kioka will fortify their defences as a countermeasure. So we have to defeat the enemy hiding in the ore mines before their reinforcements arrive. There are two objectives─ First is a swift attack, and the second is to cut off the enemy coming from the rear. Obtaining naval superiority won't just help with the first objective, but also to keep the enemy coming from the sea at bay."

The enemy units deployed in the Hioredo ore mines weren't too great in numbers. The soldiers mobilized by the Empire were more than enough to take the mines if the enemy didn't have any reinforcements. In other words, the Empire would win if they took the mines before enemy reinforcements arrive; if not, the Kioka army would be victorious.

"If we avoid sea battle here, that means giving up on seizing the Kioka harbor ahead. If they still have access to the sea and the harbor, their reinforcements will keep coming. It is clear that this will be a thorn in our side for the coming battles."

"… I agree that this is a threat. But realistically speaking, the threat of the Blast cannons looming before us is more pressing. If we engage the enemy without being sure of victory and the fleet suffers serious losses, we won't be able to even provide the minimal resupply to our allies. We must avoid that from happening."

"Choosing an alternate strategy to avoid the worst outcome, that's a very sound judgement─ but, Naval Commander Kanron, this theory only applies if we will definitely lose a sea battle."

"… You think we have a chance of winning? Having already experienced the might of the Blast cannons in the northern territories, you still think…?"

"I'm an amateur in naval warfare, so I can't say for sure, but I can raise the possibility─ before we choose the alternate strategy to avoid the worst case scenario, why don't we have a discussion with the most optimal situation in mind first?"

Yatori stopped here before turning his gaze to the pudgey youth beside her. Matthew who was staying as low key as a decoration understood that it was his turn.

─Alright, I already laid the groundwork for you.

Yatori signalled with her gaze, and Matthew responded with a stiff nod. It then took him ten seconds to raise his shaking right hand above his head.

"… I… I'm… Army! Army Second Lieutenant, Matthew Tetzirich! Erm, when the Tyrannosaur and Kioka vessel engaged in battle, I… I was there, and… I saw the enemy ship from close up… and observed it with my own eyes."

The youth did his best to speak stutteringly. He forced himself with his sense of duty and refusal to lose, he braced his heart that was shrivelling because of the stern gaze of the older and more senior officers.

"Based… Based on my past experience… allow me to propose a counter strategy against the Blast cannons vessels…"

The ship that delivered a heavy blow to the First Imperial Fleet by itself surprised its allies just as much as its enemies. The crew from

the flagship of the Kioka fourth fleet patrolling the southern seas of the former eastern territories, the "White Wing", received the scouting report from the Blast cannons vessel, "Dragon Gall", about the approaching enemy fleet.

"The enemy is an entire fleet, correct?"

On the rear deck of the White Wing, Marine Commander Greg who was the first to receive the report confirmed the contents. The messenger was frightened by Greg’s intimidating aura, but still nodded stiffly:

"Yes… Yes Sir…! The gigantic ship In the middle of the fleet was definitely the [Yellow Dragon], so it’s very likely that the enemy is the First Imperial Fleet—"

Greg didn’t even listen to the rest of the report before turning around and dashing down the stairs.

"… Hmmp, this war is turning out to be more interesting than expected…!"

For Greg’s enormous build, the narrow walkway was too cramped. He charge down the passageway, knocking down his subordinates along the way. When he reached the Admiral’s stateroom, he raised his giant fist and slammed onto the middle of the door.

"Rear Admiral! The scout ship we despatched has returned! They enemy is launching a huge offensive!"

He roared at the door, but there wasn’t any response. The anxious Greg shouted even more loudly:

"Rear Admiral! Now isn’t the time for you to rest—"

At this moment, the door in front of Greg suddenly opened. The next instant, the snarling face of the Marine Commander turned stiff. For some reason, a shirtless young man was standing behind the door

timidly─ it was Kuranga, the marine who experienced true terror at the hands of Greg some days ago.

"C-Commander… I'm helping Great Mother… No, Mdm Rear Admiral, sending food to her bird…"

Kuranga held his crumpled shirt and partner water Sprite in his arms as he explained stutteringly. There was a sweet scent on his body, and Greg understood the situation from that and sighed heavily.

"─Enough, get lost!"

His subordinate scampered away at his roar. Greg stepped into the admiral's stateroom as if he was taking his place. The same scent which was several times stronger assailed his nose.

"Hi Greg. Judging from your appearance, the situation must be abnormal."

On the bed that took up half the room, was a naked woman covered in a thin sheet─ Kioka Rear Admiral Elulufay Tenerexilla, who was smiling sweetly. On the perch atop of her bed was her pet bird, Misai.

"Yes, it's abnormal. So now isn't the time for you for casual man eating."

Greg's tone was accusatory, but Elulufay nonchalantly put on her uniform. And for some reason, she started with her top instead of her underwear. Greg had already gotten used to this sight, but was still troubled about where to look. The Marine Commander felt a onset of a slight headache and continued:

"They just got whipped in the north, but those imperials still haven't learned their lessons and mobilized their forces again. Since they sent an entire fleet here, they must be planning to seize the sea superiority here."

"Yes, that must be so."

"But what’s their goal in doing so? Take back the eastern territories? They couldn’t handle the territories in the first place, that’s why we have kindly relieved them of that burden. And now, they have come to take it back, their motives are as incomprehensible as ever."

"You are right─ ah, sorry Greg, can you pick something out of the second drawer for me?"

Greg went to the closet that his superior officer was pointing at, took an underwear at random and tossed it to the bed. Elulufay caught it with one hand with a warm smile:

"Aqua blue stripes? As expected of Greg, what exquisite taste."

"At least take your own underwear!"

Rear Admiral ignored the horrid scream of her deputy and put on her underwear slowly. Greg had no choice but to wait patiently. After she finally did the buttons on her shirt, Elulufay said again:

"I think their goal is the ore mines."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"I’m talking about the ore mines, in the western territories seized by Kioka─ which is the former eastern territories for the Empire, the Hioredo ore mines has a high iron yield, correct? Control of these mines would affect the production of the Blast cannons drastically, I think the Empire is aware of that."

She shook her long slender legs as she sat on the bed. Even after hearing this analysis, Greg didn’t buy into it completely:

"Is that really true? Then why didn’t they hold on to the mines in the first place?"

"If the Empire is a militarism country, they would probably have done that. To be honest, I feel the same as you."

The Rear Admiral said as she rest her elbow on her exposed thigh. Greg pleaded with his superior officer with a forlorn face:

"Please put on your pants…"

"Your proposal have merits, but Greg, pants is a sin to me. Since we eventually have to take it off after putting it on, I feel it's a waste of effort to repeat in this endless endeavour."

"Is it that bad? You just need to take it off once a day when you go to bed."

"Once a day...? Sorry Greg, that's very difficult. Is this some kind of deep joke?"

The sight of Elulufay thinking about it seriously made Greg sigh again. She wasn't pretending to be retarded, if she get the chance, she will pull a man into her room even if they were in the midst of sailing. "Going to bed" means very different things for Elulufay and Greg.

"Never mind, there's merit in this waste of efforts too. I will give in to your patience this time."

When he saw his superior officer finally reaching for her pants, the scary looking Marine Commander finally sigh in relief.

"Thanks a lot… Can you also stop man eating the crew indiscriminately?"

"But this only happens because I'm not being biased towards anyone. All these precious children have the rights to be embraced by me, so I won't pick and choose. So Greg, stop being stubborn and sleep with me too."

Elulufay tossed aside the pants she was just starting to put on, and waved him over happily. Even in the face of this pure temptation, Greg still averted his gaze and turned her down firmly:

"I will pass. Sorry, but I firmly believe that I should be one going after girls proactively, not the opposite. I have long graduated from my mother's embrace."

"Hmm, but Greg, this is what I believes too— Men like you who takes the long way around will still return haplessly to this place."

Elulufay said as she pointed to her bountiful breasts. Greg smiled wryly:

"I hope I can continue working hard to avoid that. But you are right— I'm really grateful to the Rear Admiral for treating me the same as the others despite my horrid face."

Greg mixed in some sincere words into his reply. Elulufay watched his back quietly, and picked up her pants again.

"… Okay, we need to gather the fleet, so set course towards the southwest for now. Can you get the crew ready to go before I put on my pants?"

"Yes Mdm!"

Greg left the admiral's stateroom after getting his orders. He navigated the narrow corridor with brisk steps and climbed up the stairs. The crew who noticed that something was amiss had already gathered at the deck. Greg called for the Chief Navigator and Boatswain, then repeated the Admiral's orders.

"Yes, understood.""Alright! Deploy the top sail!"

The ship immediately turned lively. The crew disconnected from the "Dragon Gall" while other crew men climbed up the masts to deploy the sails. When the sails caught the wind and slid out into the sea, their admiral appeared at the stairs leading onto the deck.

"Listen to me, my beloved children. It appears that war is upon us."

Elulufay announced in a gentle tone that encompassed all, and glee appeared on the faces of the crew. The content was obviously bad news, but the crew was happy to just hear her voice.

"The enemy is the First Imperial Fleet, and they best us in terms of numbers─ But no need to fear, you have me, your mother, and I have you, my children. With our tight bonds, we won't lose to the vulgar Pirate Navy."

Elulufay declared as if she was singing a song. Her pet bird Misai that was soaring in the sky landed nimbly onto her shoulder, its wings spread out like a flower in full bloom. Its feathers were blindingly white, giving its mistress the effect of a holy light behind her.

"Great Mother…""It is as you say, our [Great Mother of White Wings!]""Everything will be as you will!"

The crew praised their commanding officer as one. The woman they called the "Great Mother of White Wings" acknowledged these cheers with a gentle smile. She had a face of motherly love towards children not related to her by blood.

On the other hand, Greg who was watching this fanatic crowd scrowled his lips that were splitted all the way to his ear:

"Hmm, this is really something… But there are many ways to deal with a femme fatale."

He couldn't help smiling. The battlefield was a man's world─ he used to believe that staunchly. The Greg from back then probably couldn't imagine that he would work under a woman without complaints in the future. Meeting Elulufay was that life changing of an experience.

"And the most scary thing is, she is a woman filled with motherly love─ who can win against that? Any man will understand that defying such a person is such a waste of effort."

Because of the high ranking officers interrupting with their questions multiple times, Matthew's briefing lasted more than two hours. It felt like several times that long to him, but he managed to stave off the pressure with Yatori's support, and the assault of questions finally turned into silent thoughts.

"─Interesting."

Admiral Jurgus commented with a intimidating smile on his face with distinct features. The high ranking officers all gasped, they knew from that face that the competitive instinct of their superior officer had been lit.

"A flexible and bold idea that targets the enemy's blindspot… Well done, kid from the Tetzirich house. That's right, this is how young people should be!"

His eyes were filled with life. Standing beside his commanding officer whose fists were clenched from fighting spirit, the deputy, Naval Commander Danmier Kanron, finally said calmly:

"… I think that is an excellent idea. For an army officer, it is an extraordinary feat for the proposal to remain feasible after such rigorous scrutiny."

As Naval Commander Kanron gave the impression of being difficult and sharp, Matthew felt relieved. But at the same time, he felt vexed that he had no right to accept this praise. Because the part that Admiral Jurgus and Naval Commander Kanron judged to be "extraordinary" came mainly from the black haired youth.

"Personally, I’m not optimistic enough to think that we can win by just following this plan. This does raise a possibility, but that will change depending on the situation and luck, and is unreliable. Considering that the fate of the First Imperial Fleet will be depending on it, I can’t cast a vote of confidence─"

"I didn’t ask you to rationalize why you are flinching, Danmier."

Admiral Jurgus cut off his deputy. Even the sharp tongued Naval Commander Kanron got dumbstruck. The Fleet Admiral glared at him as he rubbed his fingers together:

"You get it, right? I’m fine with your conduct earlier, but such pretense won’t be forgiven. Success will be dependent on the situation and luck─ you tried to conceal the truth with that, but the biggest factor that will decide our success aren’t that."

"……"

"You must have realized with your smart brain. The biggest factor deciding victory or defeat is the level of training of the crews in the First Imperial Fleet. To be more precise, it’s whether all our ships can maneuver at the standard the kid from the Tetzirich house has set for us. Simply put, we will lose if we suck. Compared to this factor, how lucky we are is within our margin of error─ am I wrong?"

"…… No, it is as you say."

Admitting that his sophistry had been seen through, Naval Commander Kanron didn’t continue his facade. After his self-mocking smile flashes and fades, he turned towards his superior officer:

"Then let us stop with the pleasantries and get real. According to Second Lieutenant Matthew’s plans, the technical execution required of the First Fleet is too high. Especially for the seamanship at the crux of the battle, the plan is on a knife’s edge. Depending on the situation,

there might be ships that couldn't live up to the challenge, and failure will have drastic consequences— ughh!"

His speech was cut short. The reason was obvious, and time froze in the war room— Admiral Jurgus reached his right hand out and grabbed Naval Commander Kanron by the balls, and he looked as if he might crush them at any moment.

"Let me ask you, Danmier. Who are we?"

"—F-First Imperial… Fleet—"

"I'm talking about our identity before that— have you forgotten? We are the Katjvarna pirate navy. We are the heirs of Captain Garciev's skills and spirit, the fearless gang of violence. And our pride is built on the outstanding standards of our crew. In other words, the moment we grow fearful of our seamanship, we will have lost."

"——"

"This has nothing to do with safekeeping my position and dignity, and you are right, it shouldn't be. However, our priority is our pride as a pirate navy. From everyone present to the seaman scrubbing the decks, our pride is a common soul currency shared by every navy personnel. In other words, we won't be ourselves if we lose our pride."

The grip in his right hand increased. The boss of the pirate navy looked at his deputy who was breaking out in cold sweat and asked again:

"Are you going to insist that now is the time we should give up on our pride? That the pirate navy don't even need to be bested by the enemy, and end here right here, right now?"

"—…No … it is, as you say."

Even though his manhood was at great risk, the Naval Commander Kanron still showed an unfathomable smile. His face was full of sweat though.

"─ Ara… Ara, I have forgotten about what kind of organization I'm in… We can never do something like giving up without a fight. If we had such smarts about us, we would never have gotten the foolish reputation of being a pirate navy in the first place."

Admiral Jurgus smiled, and accepted this reluctant yield by his deputy. He removed his hand from Kanron's crotch, then slowly clench and unclench his hands in front of his face.

"I felt relieved that you didn't shrink for real."

The tension around them was gone, and the people watching them could finally breathe easy now. Despite the fear he felt from the development happening before him just now, Matthew still felt what happened just now was because of the quirk of the "Jurgus" house.

"Since it has been decided, we can't dally anymore. We have to quickly iron out the details of the tactics, and decide on the battle formation─ but before that, we have to settle some issues, Naval Commander Kutsuchi!"

The veteran sailor straightened his back, and with a stoic expression, Admiral Jurgus faced the Captain of the Tyrannosaur whose jaw was covered with white beard and said:

"I think you have already prepared yourself mentally, and understand that the Tyrannosaur won't be returning to the frontlines. We need a lot of men to scoop out water to keep the ship afloat… Repairs might be possible at a port, but there's no telling if it will sink before that. A decisive battle is coming, and we can't spare any hands… Do you understand?"

"… Aye aye, Sir."

Only during a time like this would two sailors put aside their difference in ranks and nod solemnly at each other.

For sailors, their ship is just like a house for their family

—Matthew recalled the words written in by Captain Garciev in his chronicles. The youth couldn't help wondering what it would feel like to lose his home.

"Once the preparations are done, we will scuttle the Tyrannosaur by today, and reassign her crew to other vessels. Kutsuchi, your new abode will be the [Spearfish]."

"Aye aye Sir! That's Naval Commander Higorum's ship, correct?"

"Yes, since his your old mate, it's easier to bunk over at his place, right? Make full use of your experience fighting against a Blast cannon vessel to aid him. You can bring three of your trusted aides with you."

After listening carefully to his orders, Naval Commander Kutsuchi asked a little hesitantly:

"The Missie… No, what are your thoughts on the next assignment for Naval Lieutenant Polminue?"

"I leave it to you. If you think she is a trusted aide, then take her with you. It's fine if you don't think that way, I will just treat her as a normal sailor and throw her to a suitable ship."

No matter how incompetent she is, she can at least scrub the decks, right? With a coldness befitting a war council, the Admiral made it clear that he wouldn't show her any favours. The old sailor nodded firmly and cast his gaze low.

"The assignments of the other crew will be decided in due time. If there are no further questions, this concludes the matter of the [Tyrannosaur]."

Admiral Jurgus ended this topic, and started on the next agenda:

"And with that— the only thing we need to think about now is how to defeat our enemy."

"— Actually, I could tell at a glance that the gem on her necklace was an opal turned black through impregnation. But I didn't tell her as I know that lady cherish it a lot. I asked, and it was a wedding gift from her dead father. He was a well known miser, but broke the bank to buy this gem for her. Her father didn't have an eye for gems, but this was still a heartwarming tale."

After the war council ended, Matthew returned to his cabin with Yatori and was welcomed by this long tale. Ikuta was demonstrating his glib of the tongue to Princess Chamille and Pommy.

"However, she discovered this fact in the worst way possible. She needed money because her elder sister was very ill, so she apologized to her father's grave and reluctantly went to sell her necklace. The shop's appraised it to be a fake, so her memories of her father was tarnished, and she couldn't raise the money. She told me all that while she was lost and confused. After hearing that, I decided right then to make that conman pay."

Ikuta was fluid in his speech and has good rhythm, drawing the attention of his listeners very well. The Princess and Pommy were completely entranced. The youth looked towards Matthew and Yatori who just entered to acknowledge their return as he continued with his story:

"We found that guy in no time because he had been repeating the same modus operandi without restraint. I tapped on Yatori to trace the source of the fake black opal found in the Banhatar market back then,

and got an [answer] in less than two weeks. However, the real problem starts from here. If we confront the fraud directly, he will just bluff his way through. There was no other way aside from conning him to get the money back. So I came up with a plan—"

"—Pretend to be a young master from a wealthy house who didn't have an eye for appraisal, and con them of a real gem when the target completely let down his guard. After that, he ran away without a trace, and coerce the other victims he gathered ahead of time to find the fraudster, bringing him to task. The end."

Yatori ended the topic by skipping most of the contents, which made the one telling the story passionately prone down onto his bed in tears:

"That's too mean, Yatori. I was just about to climax."

"Sorry about that. It just felt like you will be droning on for quite a while."

"Even so, you skipped too much of the plot. Before tricking him out of the gem, there are a lot of details involved too, right!?"

"That's true. You brought the fraudster to a public museum, and declared that [the items on display are from my personal collection]. That was so shockingly thick skinned of you… And that fraudster even tried to claim those items as compensation for the gem he lost."

Yatori seemed to be amused as she spoke, and covered her mouth with her hand. Matthew was relieved that she ended the topic so quickly, and stepped forth:

"… Really now, while we were struggling in the war council, you were here chatting idly?"

"Thanks to the two of you, I had a meaningful time. How's the result?"

"It was so tense and exhausting… I can understand how Major Sazarf felt during the military court proceedings… However, I think I accomplished what I set out to do. I thought things would be more complicated, but despite how Admiral Jurgus looked, his thinking is surprisingly flexible. But he is scary at times too."

"In the end, they used your proposal as the framework to construct a battle plan. Places we didn't notice was amended, but the main gist of the tactics remained the same… The result will affect the fate of an entire fleet drastically, so our responsibilities are heavy too."

"Compared to being forced to shoulder a battle that has gone terribly later, it is better to give our proposals and take responsibility ahead of time… Even if we avoided a decisive battle now, we will still need to make up for it after we make landfall. Hence, we should let the navy share part of the risk right now. Since this is a combined operation, we need to be fair about this."

The black haired youth finished with a shrug, then returned his gaze onto Matthew.

"Okay, since we are going to fight, we need to prepare ourselves too─ Matthew, you have to unload that cargo, and train your men to operate it on the ship. Have you gotten permission from Admiral Jurgus to do so?"

"Yes, he give us his blessings and is eager to see our performance on the field."

"Alright, Torway and Haro already went ahead, so you should meet up with them in the sixth cargo hold below. After bringing the cargo out, you need to test it on the Yellow Dragon, and then test it again on the ships you will be assigned to. This is necessary to advertised that this is a [weapon that can be deployed on the field]."

"Got it─ by the way, you are too used to ordering people around. Even though you are just lying in bed the entire time."

Matthew complained as he turned, and walked briskly to the passageway with no signs of fatigue at all. Ikuta waved from his bed as he saw him off, and finally propped himself up after his footsteps grew distant:

"─Yatori, which ships are our soldiers berthing in?"

"Yours are on the 'New Moon', Torway's are on the 'Sun wheel', both are on the edge of the formation. Mine is on the 'Fierce Tiger', which is located near the formation center. Only Matthew's ship had not been decided yet, but they will tell us once it has been confirmed."

Yatori continued her report before the nodding Ikuta.

"The Princess, Haro and her platoon will stay on the flag ship to tend to the wounded. I won't allow the enemy to board the flag ship, but things will get hectic here as the battle rages on. Naval Lieutenant Polminue, you─"

A light knocking interrupted him. A hoarse voice then sounded out:

"I'm Ragieshī Kutsuchi, is anyone there? I heard the missie from my place is with you."

"Grandpa Kutsuchi!"

Pommy who was called hurried to the door. Naval Commander Kutsuchi looked at her with a troubled face, and spoke hesitantly:

"… The admiral ordered my transfer to the Spearfish."

"T-Then, the Tyrannosaur…"

"The damage is too much for repairs… once the preparations are done, it will be scuttled by today."

When she heard this news, Pommy's legs gave way and she collapsed onto the floor. Yatori reached out for her on reflex, but Pommy steadied herself with a hand on the wall. The descendant of

Jurgus endured the feelings of despair as she fought to accept the consequences of her own actions.

"… Ughh… ughh… ughh…!"

She barely stopped her sobbing at the last moment. As if showing her unsightly side to others just once was already too much.

After Pommy calmed herself, Kutsuchi continued:

"I can bring three subordinates to the Spearfish with me… The rest is up to you, Naval Lieutenant Polminue."

"… I want to go, please take me with you."

Pommy squeezed out these words with a bitter expression. The old sailor was surprised by her quick response, and Naval Commander Kutsuchi opened his eyes wide:

"Is that so… But it will be hard. Intruding on another ship as a crew of a defeated ship will be an ordeal. Naval Commander Higorum is a gracious man, but the officers under him will look at you with scorn."

After hearing this warning, Pommy bit her lips hard… She had been promoted at an abnormal pace after joining the navy, and was well liked by high command, but scorned by her peers. Many would want to bully her since her debut battle ended in a horrible defeat.

"I will find a way… this is my own doing after all."

After seeing her resolve from her trembling voice, Naval Commander Kutsuchi nodded heavily. The old sailor who had finished evaluating her determination surveyed the room to look for familiar faces.

"Okay… sorry for the trouble, especially the boys from the Tetzirich and Remeon houses─ oh, they aren't here? I was thinking about apologizing to them before I take Pommy with me."

"I will send them your regards. Naval Commander, please be careful in the next battle, I don’t think it will be an easy fight."

Ikuta advised from his bed, and the old sailor nodded with a serious face:

"I won’t be the Captain of the ship, but I will do everything that I can… I promise that I will keep your advice in mind."

The old sailor bowed deeply and left quietly. Pommy followed him, but stopped right at the door, then said a little hesitantly:

"… Thank you… Erm… For your help in so many ways…"

After stuttering her words of thanks, she added in a barely audible volume:

"… Please tell that guy for me too."

At the same time at another place, Matthew who left the room earlier went to the steerage below to meet up with Torway and Haro. Seeing them unloading cargo alongside their subordinates, the pudgey youth rolled up his sleeves and joined them.

"… How much can this thing do against the enemies’ Blast cannons?"

In the dim steerage lit by luminous sprite, the canvas covering the cargo was removed, revealing the metallic body of a mid sized cannon. Torway smiled at Matthew who was both worried and expectant at the same time and smiled awkwardly:

"If we fire at each other at a count of three, it won’t be a contest at all. But depending on how we use it, this thing will have its chance to shine. As for the things that needed to be done before that time comes, let’s believe in Ik-kun’s tactics and the capabilities of the navy."

"That’s true… the navy will be in charge of the bulk of the operation, which makes me anxious. Even if we want to attack, we have no choice but to wait for the ships to go near the enemy."

The two of them continued to work as they spoke, directing their subordinates to unload the cargo in the right order. When they were taking a short break, Haro who was working some distance away walked towards them with a strained expression. She was carrying a heavy crate in her arms.

"M-Matthew-san, Torway-san! Erm, Ikuta-san asked me to give each of you ten bottles after unloading the cargo!"

After saying that, she placed a crate onto the ground, which was filled with bottles of brown liquid. Matthew picked up a bottle and appraised it.

"What is this? Looks like wine…"

"That’s correct! This is distilled spirit made from sugarcane!"

"Sugarcane wine? Oh, that is often mentioned in Captain Garciev’s chronicles… Wait! He went out of his way to get this thing onboard? What is he thinking? If there is space for wine, he should have brought more ammunition!"

"—He also said that Matthew-san will definitely be mad. Ikuta-san has another message:[This is the best ammunition against pirates. Before the decisive battle, everyone should put it to good use on the ships you will be boarding]."

"So… Simply put, Ik-kun wants us to use these wines to butter up to them…?"

Torway thought with a wine in hand. Matthew was convinced after hearing him say that.

"So this will be the backing that will soothen our relationship with the sailors on our ships, huh… If that is so, then I will take this.

However, I don’t think just gifting them wine will be enough to improve their treatment of us."

The three of them looked at each others with doubts in their mind, and decided to to divide up the wine anyways.

With the looming battle before them, the "Yellow Dragon" was very hectic, and Yatori heading to level 2 to meet with her subordinates was caught in there. She was in charge of a company, and although she received the orders to transfer them to the other mid sized ships early, they had to be seperated to several ships because of their numbers. This was in fact the last chance for her to give any instructions to her entire company.

"OC, the marines plans to engage the enemy with just a saber, instead of air shooters or crossbows. Should we change our weapons?"

"No need. We have been training with these weapons all along, there is no point in mimicking the navy now. Sabers might be more wieldy on a ship, but in the untrained arm, it will just increase the risk of hurting our own allies. Armed the men with spears attachments, and fight by using thrusts."

Even in a different environment, her judgement was still as accurate and unwavering. The uneasiness of Yatori’s subordinates were allayed when they heard Yatori’s command.

"Be it land or sea, melee combat remains the same, what we need to do won’t be too different. There is no need to be afraid, but don’t charge in recklessly in witless bravado either. Work together with your comrades to take down the enemy. If we do that, we will definitely win."

"Yes!""Understood!"

The convinced troops left with their orders. Princess Chamille beside Yatori watched them leave sighed in awe:

"What firm determination. Even amidst the undulating tides, you remained as steady as ever."

"Some of my men are down from seasickness, so as their Officer Commanding, I have to take the place of the steady land, where they could put their trust in."

The two of them chatted as they cast their gaze inside the room. A familiar figure was hobbling pass the half open door. As that figure was carrying something that shouldn't be there on his shoulder, Yatori and the Princess looked at each other:

"… I will be right back, please take care of the men."

After leaving the rest to her deputy, the vermillion haired girl left the room, with the Princess right behind her. They walked down the corridor briskly, and caught up with that figure walking with a crutch at the stairs leading up to the quarter deck.

"… My eyes didn't trick me. What are you doing?"

"Oh, Yatori, and the Princess. It is exactly what you are seeing."

Ikuta answered casually with a hand on his crutch, and another holding a fishing rod that was twice his height for who knows why. Yatori climbed up the stairs with unsteady steps right to where he was staying, and asked mockingly:

"So you can finally get off your bed, and can even practice tearing the enemies' sails with a fishing hook?"

"I didn't think of that. Well, since we are so far from the shore, the fish we can catch are very different too, right? So I want to give it a try."

"On a warship preparing for battle? What impressive passion towards angling."

"I was surprised that my request was permitted. It seems that catching some fish is better than just idling around in bed."

They were ushered by cloudy skies when they walked up the stairs. After walking by the rear mast, they stopped at the railings at the back of the ship and the youth put bait onto his hook. The bait was moldy jerky.

"Alright!"

He slowly swing the rod towards the sea after completing this step. The hook and sinker swayed in the air, and the reel by his hand started feeding out line. This was Yatori's first time seeing this tool, and he said in an impressed tone:

"I was just wondering how you will overcome the distance from the ship deck to the ocean. So you have such a convenient tool."

"Isn't that right? I can cast the hook to the position I want, and I don't need to pull back the fishing line by hand too. Fishermen tools are a treasure trove of inventiveness."

After adjusting the length of the line, Ikuta sat down. He leaned the rod against the railing and remained still with his eyes on the horizon. Princess Chamille wanted to talk to him, but hesitated. There was a strangely tense aura about this youth.

As the seagulls cries, the girl with flamed colored hair spoke quietly as she looked into the distance too:

"Your plan this time seems to be sending Matthew out to act."

"That's right. Thanks to him, I can slack off all I want."

"It might look that way, but your mind seems to be hard at work."

The youth kept his peace. A while later, he smiled wryly, as if he had given up.

"… Was it so obvious? I don't think so, right?"

"It was obvious. Going by your personality, when it's time to play, you will play hard. You are holding the fishing rod absentmindedly, so I doubt you are really slacking off."

That's right— Ikuta said self mockingly, retracted his left hand from his shaft and raised it up high.

"To be frank, I want to slack off too— now that I think about it I was overworked in the northern territories."

"That's true, that war was hectic. The situation kept changing, and there wasn't much time to even sleep or eat."

"Yup. While we were all busy— I somehow lost a pinky."

Ikuta reached his left hand that was missing a pinky towards the cloudy sky, and tilted his head as if he was confounded by it.

"I don't think that was a mistake, but it wasn't something that I will normally do. After all, it hurts a lot— even thinking back about it is enough to make me puke. I thought I will die from the pain. If you ask me to do it again now, I won't be able to do it. However, I did it back then."

"……"

"How did I managed it back then? — I don't want to admit, but it's because I'm a hero. When I was in that harsh and cruel battlefield, I subconsciously want to be a hero."

Ikuta confessed in disgust, and clenched his four fingers.

"[All heroes dies from overwork] the advice I gave the General of Insomniatic Brilliance is actually a wake up call to myself. Heroes

aren't made from innate talent, but created by circumstances. Powerful foes, people that needed to be protected, and a conviction that must be upheld. If all these conditions are met, anyone can easily become a hero. When the masses wishes for that, the insignificant individual can only fade to the background, and didn't even understand that it is a trap."

A strong wind rises. The seated youth shrinked his body, as if he was enduring the strong pressure of the wind.

"A hero being born from a desperate situation that is unavoidable is still understandable… but in most cases, a hero is created because of the laziness and dependencies of others. The Empire is creating many such heroes and pushing them to exhaustion— so I don't want this to happen to me, or the people around me."

The sea breeze eased, and the tensed mouth of the youth relaxed a little.

"That's why I chose Matthew. He is motivated, refuses to give up and is responsible… but somehow gives the impression of being unreliable, so that's just right. People might think of him kindly, but won't become dependent on him. That's why people around him won't slack off in the wrong way, or use the wrong method to do their work."

Yatori nodded slightly. She had about the same expectation for that slightly pudgey youth.

"Matthew doesn't need to put on a facade of dignity or personal style. Ever since I met him, I had always admired his mediocrity. No matter how many times I see it, the way he gets shaken for the right reasons and continues to grow in a natural way always seems so respectable… But don't ever say that in his face."

"Yes, I can imagine how mad he will be… But your mind isn't slacking off after delegating all this work to Matthew. And that's because—"

Ikuta cast a serious gaze seawards as he dipped the tip of his rod a little:

"Because our opponent is Kioka… Firstly, we won't be fighting a stupid admiral, even hoping for mediocrity will be too much. To be honest, compared to Blast cannons, I'm more worried about that. It's even worse since I don't have full command authority…"

The vermillion haired girl concurred with the youth's worries with a tensed face.

"Yes, I know this feeling very well. That dangerous situation against the [General of Insomniatic Brilliance] comes to mind— however…"

Yatori's tone turned strong towards the end. She took a step forward and grabbed Ikuta's rod from the side. The rod that was leaning limply on the railing was suddenly raised to the cloudy sky all high and erect.

"Promise me one thing— if something like cutting off a pinkie comes up again, let me do it next time."

"— That's…"

"And of course, it will be best if no one needs to lose a pinky, but that is inevitable at times. So if something like losing a pinky happens again, let me take one for the team next time. No complaints alright? Because the two of us have to take turns."

The youth looked right back at the girl with his black eyes. Yatori Shino was smiling like an accomplice:

"When the masses wishes for that, the insignificant individual can only fade to the background— isn't that what you said? But if it is just

two people, things will be different. Even a gear that would crush any small stone in its way, there is a chance it might stop if two stones are caught in it at the same time."

They stayed together to avoid losing each other. The resolve that the youth expressed in the past made a round trip and returned to the youth.

"Yatori Shino wishes so, what say you, Ikuta?"

"… I can't refute that. Because my wish is for you to live a life that you want. That is the one thing that has never changed— since that day."

Ikuta answered with a wry smile, and grabbed onto his shaft again— at this instant, faint footsteps could be heard walking away from behind them.

"— Your Highness?"

Yatori turned back on reflex, but the Princess standing there was already long gone.

After going from the quarterdeck to the stairs and descending to the level beneath, her feet started to move on their own. The Third Princess spooked several sailors she bumped into along the way, but her heart was a mess, and she couldn't spare the effort to worry about these things.

"Ah, you are back, Your Highness —uwah!"

She charge along the corridor and the guest stateroom soon appeared before her, slightly to the right. The Princess head straight passed the guards who were saluting and greeting her, and went straight in.

A bed that was one size larger than the ones used by officers, a desk with ample space and two wicker chairs welcome the mistress of the room. Two windows were situated nearby to better illuminate the room for the guest. In terms of a personal room on a warship, this was the highest class stateroom. However, the Princess had been going around together with the members of the knight corps, so this stateroom assigned for her personal use lack a sense of liveliness.

She shut the door and locked it. After getting her personal space, her last bits of reason finally crumbled. Princess Chamille collapsed onto her bed and started to cry.

"Ughh… Ughh…!"

The pain rippling in the depths of her heart made the girl moan in agony.

─So if something like losing a pinky happens again, let me take one for the team next time─

"… Ah…"

It wouldn't go away. Even when she cover her ears desperately, the conversation between the two wouldn't stop repeating.

─No complaints alright? Because the two of us have to take turns─

"… Aah…"

The girl listened to the creak as her heart started twisting and turning, and curled herself into a ball. She looked just like someone who died after getting scorched by the sun.

─Yatori Shino wishes so, what say you, Ikuta─

There was no redemption for her, just like a sinner in hell.

─I can't refute that. Because my wish is for you to live a life that you want.─

"… Aaahhh…!"

Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik cursed herself as she rolled around in scorching heat. She cursed her own foolishness, uselessness, and incorrigible corruption.

Why was she hoping— to tear this friendship apart?

Why was she certain— that she was capable of breaking their bonds.

She knew very well. The souls of Ikuta Solork and Yatori Shino Igsem were bound together and inseparable. There wasn't any space for others at all. Even just thinking about butting in was so sinful.

Her rational side knew very well that she should stop such delusions, and walk her path of destruction on her own… If her wishes couldn't come to fruition, then she should just go off to a faraway land, and obediently wait for her solitary end.

"—Ugh!"

…… However.

However… However… She already dreamed about this, and couldn't suppress her hopes and expectations any more.

Hope that the dark haired youth would walk alongside her, hope the ending that he would wrought, and hope for the completely destructive end.

She also hoped that her final judgement would be done by this youth— as well as her redemption.

"…… How hideous…"

Tears flowed down her cheeks and stained the sheets. Her words were mixed with sobbings:

"… I am really… hideous…"

The girl reproached herself for her unforgivable sin, and kept weeping motionlessly. Her tears kept flowing and flowing─

When the setting sun almost touched the western horizon, the ceremony to mark the end of the long service of the "Tyrannosaur" was held. The "Tyrannosaur" was towed by the "Spearfish" westward, far away from the fleet, and all that was left was for the waves to claim it.

"Rounding it up, it has been 24 years, this ship has sailed for many long years─ let go of the tow rope when you are ready."

The Captain of the "Spearfish", Naval Commander Higorum stood at the bow of the ship with a smoking pipe in his mouth as he said that. After hearing the considerate words of his old friend, Naval Commander Kutsuchi who was standing at the fore of the funeral procession made up of his subordinates nodded quietly:

"─ Our ship, our home. Thank you for not faltering to the cannon bombardment, and sheltering us until the very end…"

These emotional words was like a eulogy for the ship that had completed its mission. Compared to the old sailor, Naval Lieutenant Polminue who was holding back her tears spent a shorter amount of time with this ship. Naval Commander Kutsuchi spent most of his life on the "Tyrannosaur", and to him, it was truly his "home".

"You are also the cradle that nurtured many sailors. Not just the people under me, even I myself learned how to get along with the sea under your tutelage. Through rain and calm, we rest and sleep under your rocking embrace. We fought together through countless storms to achieve victories."

Sobbing could be heard behind the two of them. This was only natural, as the end of a ship they shared good times and hard times with, was like losing a family.

"Thank you for being with us all this time. It is finally time for us to part─ I pray that you will shelter the 17 souls who parted with us earlier to the Lord."

With that, Naval Commander Kutsuchi took a step back from the anchoring point. With that as a signal, Pommy and two other crew jogged to the stern of the ship and untied the towline connecting the two vessels.

The battered "Tyrannosaur" lost the last chain keeping it afloat, and drifted to the west. Water gushed in from the hole under the ship, and half of it was already submerged. It didn't matter if it would sink first or disappear beyond the horizon, the crew wished to witness its last moments─ However, the setting sun ignored the hopes of the sailors, and plunged the sea into darkness before either of that happened.

In the middle of the dark ocean, Naval Commander Kutsuchi issued his last orders as a Captain to his crew that had lost their ship:

"… That's the end of the ceremony. After this ship returns to the fleet, all personnels are to report to your next post immediately."

His subordinates standing in formation didn't move even when he said that. Seeing how they were lost in grieve, the old sailor couldn't take it anymore and roared:

"Stop moping around! The sea won't wait for you to get yourself back on your feet!"

Urged by his yell, the former crew of the "Tyrannosaur" finally started moving. In the funeral procession that was slowly dispersing, Pommy cast one last gaze towards the "Tyrannosaur" that had been engulfed by the darkness.

"… Ugh…"

She already decided not to cry, but a tear still slid down her cheek. She wiped it away crudely with the back of her palm, and didn't turn back again.

After sending off her sister ship, the "Spearfish" returned to the fleet. The crew that lost their ships moved to the other vessels as per their given orders. The familiar faces left one after another, until only Naval Commander Kutsuchi and the three subordinates he picked were left on the "Spearfish".

"Anyways, let me introduce you to the naval officers under my charge."

Naval Commander Higorum said with an unlit pipe in his mouth. Naval Commander Kutsuchi, Pommy, and the Chief Navigator and Boatswain of the "Tyrannosaur" followed him down the stairs in a single file… The design of the mid sized ships were all about the same, but the passageway still felt unfamiliar to the four of them.

"Here's the place… there is actually no need for introductions, but let's talk inside."

Naval Commander Higorum opened the door at the end of the corridor, and the naval officers of the "Spearfish" waiting in the room stood up and saluted. Everyone from 1st to 5th Lieutenant were gathered, three were men and two were women.

<TL: Will use 1st Lieutenant for the navy appointment, and First Lieutenant for the Army rank.>

When their eyes rest on her, Pommy fought back the urge to back away. There were familiar faces amongst the five of them, and given the current situation, she had an ominous feeling.

"Naval Commander Kutsuchi and his subordinates are from the Tyrannosaur. I don't need to explain more, correct?"

"Aye Sir! We understand!"

The burly youth who seemed to be the 1st Lieutenant answered in a strong tone. Naval Commander Higorum nodded, and looked at his old friend.

"I'm Ragieshī Kutsuchi. It's a shame that my ship was lost in a fight, I will be in your care."

After hearing the veteran's short introduction, the naval officers answered with a salute. With the precedence set, Pommy and the others also introduced themselves.

"— That's about it, correct? Take care of the rest."

It wasn't clear if he was motivating his crew or giving them instructions, the Captain of the "Spearfish" left the room after saying that nonchalantly, together with Naval Commander Kutsuchi. Only the five naval officers and the three new transfer personnels were left. Before they even get the chance to feel awkward, the first attack landed:

"— Oh, I can't imagine how thick skinned one must be to come here."

The 1st Lieutenant youth said. It was obvious who he was referring to, and Pommy looked at him with trembling shoulders.

"How impressive. To live on so nonchalantly after losing a ship because of your mistake."

"That's right. Hey, why don't you jump overboard now?"

The shorter of the two female officers with drooping eyes concurred with the youth, and Pommy squeezed out an answer.

"… I will… make up for my mistake… definitely…"

"Huh? Hey, are you retarded? —there won't be a chance like that! At least not in this coming battle!"

The youth roared intimidatingly and slammed his fist into the table. Pommy shirked away.

"Let me make this clear, you lot will only perform mindless chores! Scrub the deck and sharpen the blades, your will be given the night watch at best! You won't get to handle the sails, much less take the helm— simply put, you will be treated like the lowest ranking sailor! Do you understand, Sixth Lieutenant Polminue Jurgus!?"

The young officer announced sarcastically. He wasn't wrong, in the Katjvarna navy, the hierarchy between the Naval Lieutenants were decided by each ship. Pommy who was the 1st Lieutenant of the "Tyrannosaur" had lost all her standings after her transfer to the "Spearfish". Naval Lieutenants were ranked from first to fifth, and since there were already five officers before her, instead of Sixth Lieutenant, Pommy's position was equivalent to a midshipman apprentice.

"You better keep your head down and don't make a bigger fool of yourself! If we are in a good mood, we will let you help a little."

"I agree! By the way, can you start working now? The toilet is really filthy!"

The female officer from earlier happily pushed her chores to Pommy, and Pommy looked at her with a troubled face:

"… You are still the same, Yorin. You are this guy's lackey now…?"

Pommy retorted, and Yorin's smile vanished immediately. She got up from her seat, grabbed Pommy's head with one hand and banged it to the wall.

"Don't get cocky now, you loser! You sow who's only good point is your lineage!"

Yorin cursed violently like a completely different person, her nails sinking into Pommy's neck. Pommy couldn't shout as her windpipe was being tightened, and could only groan. The other three officers turned a blind eye, while the two other newcomers were at a loss as they were in hostile territory.

After gaining the upper hand, Yorin reverted to her original tone and continued:

"Hey Pommy, do you get it now? The time when you can rely on the halo of your house's reputation is over… I think it will be the best for all parties if you understand it quickly…?"

"… I know… I had been relying too much on the authority of the Jurgus house in the past… and… I sullied that name…"

"Ara, so you do know! In that case, you should have the right attitude, you know? How about licking my shoes clean? Just like the failure of a dog you are!"

Yorin took her hand away, and lift a feet before the face of Pommy who was squatting down and coughing. She had a malicious smile, adamant on breaking her opponent's last bastion of pride.

Polminue glared at her, and knocked the feet away hard.

"… Who will do such a thing! Even if I'm not worthy to be a Jurgus, I will not yield to you!"

"… Tch! You sow, how dare you act so cocky—"

When the enraged Yorin was about to grab Pommy again, knocking came from the door. She retracted the hand reaching for Pommy's collar frantically. After the unnatural sound of footsteps subsided, the door opened slowly, revealing a new comer.

"P-Pardon my intrusion, erm, well… I'm reinforcement from the army, Matthew Tetzirich, and has been assigned to the [Spearfish]. So… I will be in your care."

The slightly plump youth saluted after his self-introduction. The naval officers of the "Spearfish" looked at each other in surprise. Realizing that he had barged into a troublesome scene, Matthew immediately presented the "ammunition" he was hiding behind his back:

"To commemorate our first meeting, this is a little token from me. I already send some of the supplies to the Captain… Does everyone like sugarcane wine?"

The First Lieutenant grabbed one of the bottles by random, inspected the label, and opened his eyes wide:

"─[Divine Wine of the Far Southern Sea]! From the brewery in the Motago province that only produce tens of bottles a year!?"

"Huh!""Really!?""Wait, let me see!"

Seeing the officers make such a big fuss over a bottle of wine surprised Matthew. But that was only natural. The "Divine Wine of the Far Southern Sea" brought in by him was a high grade sugarcane wine from the Motago province, located in the southern territories of the Empire. Not only was it high in quality, very little was produced annually, and it was made with a type of sugarcane brought back by Captain Garciev after his journey to the south─ known as "Southern Nectar". In other words, it was a legendary spoils of war.

For members of the Katjvarna navy who thought of Captain Garciev as their forebears, this wine bottle was a symbol of great fortune. Everyone knew about this, but because of its high price and rarity, it was extremely difficult for subaltern officers to even catch a glimpse of it. They only managed to procure this because of Princess Chamille's status and financial support.

And now, not only was this luxurious item right before them, they could even hold it. It would be harder for them not to be excited.

"… Hey, are you okay?"

While the officers’ attention was diverted by the wine, Matthew casually walked to Pommy who was leaning against the wall. She held the right hand offered to her in a daze.

"Sorry, I heard a bit of the conversation from the corridor."

Matthew pulled Pommy up and leaned his face close at the same time, then said in a volume not audible to the others:

"Well, there will always be people like that anywhere… I also encountered the same thing when I was commissioned as an officer, how troubling. Ah, it also happened to me on the last ship I was on."

Pommy’s chest pricked a little. But after taking this mild revenge, the pudgy youth let go of all his grudges, and shrugged with a refreshing voice:

"But compared to a real battlefield, this isn’t that bad. Don’t mind it too much, and just bear with it with an open mind."

Matthew had an energetic smile as he said that, and Pommy was lost in his eyes. She never had someone she could rely on so much─ but it was a long time before she was aware of her feelings with a blushing face.

As the members of the Knight Corps felt the effect of the "ammunition" on the ships they were on, Haro who was staying on the "Yellow Dragon" with the Princess set up a field hospital in a room on the third deck.

"Hmm～ there’s not enough space on the floor… how troubling～ we can’t suspend the wounded on hammocks either."

"I don’t advise that, their blood circulation will suffer."

Her partner Water Sprite Miru came out of her pouch to give suggestions. The room Haro was in didn’t have any windows to avoid

water seeping in, and had to depend on a luminous sprite to illuminate the humid room. She crossed her arms and started to think.

After experiencing the unrest in the northern territories, setting up field hospitals was a cinch for her. But with the limited space on a warship, she had to adjust the set up accordingly.

"The only way is to let the wounded lie on the corridor… If I can get an empty warehouse—"

"That’s fine, I will report it to the top."

The sudden voice from behind startled Haro. She turned and found Naval Commander Danmier Kanron standing in the room bustling with medics. He had a smile on his thin face.

"Ah… hmm? Erm, thank you, it will be a big help if you can do so."

"Don’t mention it, maybe I will be the one using your medical service."

Haro could only answer with an awkward smile to that half joking statement: "Please take care not to let that happen." Naval Commander Kanron nodded lightly, then swept his gaze around the room:

"By the way— Second Lieutenant Bekker, your subordinates moves swiftly, are familiar with their jobs, but won’t handle things haphazardly. They maintain a sense of tension at all times… It is clear that they had plenty of practical experience."

"Yes～ so far, our unit had never been idle… Being of help is a good thing, but I wish I can occasionally say things like [No one got hurt this time, how boring]."

"I feel the same… If this ship has massive casualties, that means we are probably going to lose the battle. There might not be time to put the second room to use then."

This was another reason why the ship’s field hospital was not inside a spacious room. If another room was needed to house the casualties, they would be depleted of so many crew members that they couldn’t even function as a flag ship anymore. Haro knew this very well, but she still shook her head:

"Even if this ship falls, the wounded will still be here. We can still attended to the injured after surrendering, correct? So we will still need another room."

When he heard that, Naval Commander Kanron stopped smiling vaguely and stared at the medic before him:

"— You are saying that you will stay here and continue to work even after the battle is lost?"

"My work remains the same no matter if it is victory or defeat, that is to save as many wounded as I can."

Haro said with a steady smile. In the face of such brilliant determination, the sharp tongued Naval Commander also gave up.

"It’s my loss, the wounded under your care are lucky… However, Second Lieutenant Bekker..."

The next moment, the man looked at Haro with eyes of pity:

"That sounded sincere without a single bit of falsehood. I have to say, it’s great that you can feel this way."

"Huh…?"

Haro didn’t understand what he meant and tilted her head confusedly. Naval Commander Kanron suddenly leaned to her ears and said quietly in a voice audible to Haro:

"… I will be counting on you when the time comes— comrade Haroma."

The instant she heard that ending phrase, Haro turned stiff as if she was drenched in ice water. Naval Commander Kanron walked passed the dumbstruck Haro and left with silent strides.

Even after he was completely gone, Haro still couldn’t move. Some time later, a subordinate who passed by her said worriedly.

"… What’s wrong, Second Lieutenant? You don’t look so good…"

"Nothing, I’m fine. I was just dazed for a little."

Haro who finally snapped back at her subordinate’s voice squeezed out a smile and pretended to be fine. This allayed her subordinate’s worries and he went back to work.

"… Ughh…"

Haro watched his back grow distant as she clenched her fingers that just wouldn’t stop trembling.

Chapter 2: Battle of the Fleets

A shadow swooped towards the waves of the sea at a sharp angle. When it was about to hit the water surface, it flapped its wings hard, and returned to the sky again.

"Woah."

A man on the beach cheered at the sight of a fish in the claws of the shadow. In the meantime, this highly skilled hunter went around the sea, and returned to its mistress waiting by the shore.

"— Well done, Misai."

The hunter glided quickly to the ground, and after tossing the fish to the beach, it flew to the girl standing beside the man, and landed on her right shoulder that was covered in leather. It was a ferocious bird of prey with a white body and black wings— a osprey. It seemed to be young, and was just one size bigger than a seagull.

The girl picked up the fish, sliced off some meat off the back of the fish with her knife, and tossed it to her partner cawing proudly on her shoulder. Misai nimbly caught the meat with its beak, then swallowed it in one gulp, and looked pleased with the taste.

"Amazing, what a splendid showing."

The man clapped, but the girl didn’t even look his way as she tossed the fish into the basket on her waist and walked away. The man wasn’t deterred by her cold attitude, and followed behind her matter of factly:

"So this is the technique of the Lao [falconers]? I heard the rumours, but I didn’t expect to see this. It’s amazing how the king of the sky follows the instruction of a human so docilely."

The girl continued walking on the beach, and didn’t react to his words. The man blew warm air into his cold hands, and refused to give up:

"It’s a shame that such a wonderful technique will be lost after your generation."

Her strides slowed at this moment, and the man matched her pace naturally:

"I heard from the elderly in the village that you are the last of the [Falconer Tribe]. The others didn’t return after going off to war."

"……"

"The war against the neighboring Bayushie is at a complete standstill, no matter which side wins, neither nation would be capable to survive the aftermath. It won’t be too long before that happens, what do you plan to do then?"

The man went straight to the point, and the girl beside her stopped and fell silent. She couldn’t answer even if she wanted to. It took all that she had to live day to day, she had never thought about the future.

"If you have nowhere to go, why not come with me? There might be a place where your skills can be put to use."

"… Skills… You mean the fishing skills?"

You can just find the fishermen then.

The girl glared at the man with that in mind, and he shrugged in an exaggerated manner:

"That’s not all you can do, correct? I heard that the [Falconer Tribe] can tell the wind directions."

"What good will that be aside from fishing?"

"I can think of a few other uses. Allow me to brag a little, I'm much more imaginative than others."

"… Who exactly are you?"

The girl was tired of this conversation that wasn't leading anywhere, and got to the crux of the matter. When he heard this question, the man showed a fearless smile and spread his arms open. His trenchcoat fluttered in the wind, and a navy blue jacket and pants could be seen underneath/

"―Me? Well, I'm just a patriot you can find anywhere. Making a country that is doing well even better is my raison d'etre. That's the kind of person I am."

Unlike the way he avoided the question, his eyes looked straight at the girl. The girl felt drawn to the light in his eyes for some reason. The girl probably sensed that the man's objective was somewhere that didn't exist yet, a world that was completely different from here.

The two stared at each other without a word. Misai that was on the girl's shoulder suddenly cawed loudly. The girl recalled something important, and started walking again.

"… I can talk with you, but we need to return to the village right now."

"? I'm fine with that, do you have urgent matters to attend to?"

"Not really… Hurry, it's going to rain."

The girl answered curtly. The moment she pulled her straw hat over her head, dark clouds appeared above them. The man didn't even have time to be surprised when heavy rain suddenly fell from the sky that was clear just moments ago. Even the thunder started booming all of a sudden.

"―Amazing."

Even though his body was drenched by the thunderstorm, his smile deepened. A flash of lightning blazed through the cloudy skies, turning everything blindingly white.

Before the eyes of the girl, the navy blue jacket and pants were tinted from the moisture, and turned darker than black.

"─Ugh…"

Anxious knocking entered her ears, and Elulufay who dreamt of the distant past was pulled back to the present. She looked out the window that could only be found in the Captain's stateroom aboard a large ship, and the bright sunlight shining in. She then looked at the two naked men on either side of her, and sighed.

"─Rear Admiral! It's already past reveille! And three of my guys are missing!? Do you know their whereabouts!?"

The hoarse roar of the Marine Commander and his insistent knocking could be heard inside the room. The two male marines who were sound asleep woke up because of the noise.

"… Commander! O-Oh no…!""Uwah! I was planning to get up before dawn…!"

"Sorry, I also overslept."

Elulufay smiled apologetically as she watched their faces turned green. She then got up, and opened the door without any hesitation.

"Sorry Greg, I slept for too long."

"That will happen every now and then… and you are butt naked again…"

Greg's mouth that was split right up to his ears scrowled a little as he sighed. He scanned the room with sharp eyes, and found the two sailors who haven't even put on their underwear quivering like newborn fawns.

"I found two at the same time, how lucky… Cory, Solbert, get your ass dressed and go to the deck. You will have hell to pay later."

With their fates sealed, the two of them dressed up in lightning speed and charged out of the captain's stateroom with tears in their eyes. The fearsome looking Marine Commander sighed again, and his superior returned to the side of her bed as she remembered something.

"Sorry, it's not just two." "…G-Great Mother!"

Under the sheets was another trembling naked man. Veins popped up at Greg's temples as he dragged his witless subordinate off the bed and booted him out of the cabin, without giving him any chance to dress. In the end, he still tossed the sailor's clothes after him out of a sense of pity.

"Enough already, Rear Admiral! If you spoil them like this, I will have to train up their relaxed mentality again!"

"If you treat them so strictly, I will have to spoil them even more. What a wonderful division of duties."

"I'm not joking around! Marines lives and dies by the blade, it will be all over for me if my men look down on me! I don't show any mercy in their training to avoid that! Do you know what they call me behind my back? To complement you, the [Great Mother], they are calling me [Dad]! I almost blacked out when I first heard that nickname!"

When he heard that scream of despair, Elulufay let go of the clothes in her hand started laughing with her hands on her tummy. Greg held his head with both hands.

"Haha… D-Dad…! ─No, sorry, I shouldn't joke about this. But Greg, that doesn't sound too bad, right? If you think of the Fourth Fleet as a family, then [Dad] is the symbol of deepest respect and reverence."

"That’s a given, I won’t stand being looked down on… But Rear Admiral, leaving my men aside, isn’t it too bold to oversleep in such a situation? It has been three days since the scouting ships brought back news of the enemy fleet. It won’t be strange for the enemy to attack right now."

"That won’t happen. The earliest they will attack is in four days."

Elulufay answered as she wore her shirt, and Greg frowned puzzledly:

"Why is that? Are the Empire’s ships that slow?"

"The performance of our ships isn’t that different, the issue lies with the sea wind in this region. The wind is blowing to the west now, right? Assuming the enemy attack from the west, then we will engage them from the east. What do you think is the effect of this west wind?"

Marine Commander thought about it, and nodded in agreement:

"I see, the enemy will have to attack from downwind. Which means, you don’t think the Imperial Navy will attack under such unfavorable conditions, Rear Admiral?"

"Any sailor with common sense won’t want to fight against the wind, because they know how much restriction they will face. Besides, we had a skirmish with them a few days ago, which left a deep impression of our Blast cannons on their mind. Since they know their equipment is inferior to ours, they will try their best to gain the advantage of the wind. To do so, they will probably make a detour and attack from the east."

After Elulufay finished putting on her shirt slowly, she finally reached for her underwear. Greg grunted:

"So before the enemy make their detour and attack, we can only wait in the harbour… But Rear Admiral, is it fine to give the enemy the upwind? Wouldn't we be at the disadvantage when that happens?"

"It's fine. Including this ship, we have several Blast cannon vessels. If we formed up properly to engage them, we can negate the disadvantage of being downwind. What I'm more worried about is the enemy slipping away if we fight for the upwind position. You must understand the reason why I want to avoid that, correct?"

"Because the harbor will be attacked. The defenders will engage them, and when we attack them, they will be surrounded from both sides and put up a desperate fight. If they manage to take the harbor, the Fourth Fleet will lose our base and be stranded at sea."

"It is as you say. This is the most logical way for us to lose the war. So we have to destroy that possibility early, which is one of the reason we are waiting in this harbour─ so this fleet can be deployed to intercept the Imperial navy if they attack."

The west wind blowing outside the window started to howl, and the ship they were on started shaking, as if in agreement with her clear theory. Elulufay listened to that sound as she put on her pants, with the face of a theologist that encountered a difficult religious question.

"According to Misai's prediction, the wind will peak today, and there might be a storm in the afternoon. The thought of how troublesome it is to sail in such weather made me glad that we are berthed idly in this harbor."

"… Yes yes, I understand why the Rear Admiral is so relaxed. But even if the enemy doesn't attack, the duties of a fleet admiral should keep you really busy."

"You are right. Don't worry, I'm not dreaming so much to think that I can sleep the entire day just because of the strong breeze."

After wearing her trademark feather coat, Elulufay Tenerexilla had finally regained her dignity of a naval admiral. After confirming that Greg turned around:

"─ You seem to be awake now, so I should return to my ship too. I was still stationed on the [White Wings] just a few days ago, which made me forget that I have been posted to another ship."

"Yes, thank you for your hard work. Remember to wake me up tomorrow too."

The fearsome looking Marine Commander decided to ignore that last part, and left his superior’s room. Elulufay felt him walking away from behind the closed door, and stretched her back:

"Alright, I should visit my cute sailors today too─"

She said as she reached for her pet bird perched above the bed. When her pale fingers was about to caress its feathers, a loud alarm bell drowned out the ever present sound of the sea breeze.

"Enemy fleet sighted! I say again, enemy fleet sighted in the west!"

One of the six ships that left the harbour for patrol sighted a fleet on the western horizon─ including the flagship "White Wing", all the vessels in the harbour heard the alarm bell from the sea gulf nearby. The sailors’ fighting spirit were also ignited.

The Nimong harbor that served as the base of the Kioka Fourth Naval Fleet was the only port in the former eastern territories that faces the south. The deep gulf of the terrain allowed many ships to be berthed there safely.

As there wasn’t any other ports in the region that could be put to use immediately, this was a strategic location during the battles for the former east territories in the past. This wasn’t the Empire’s first attack on this place. The past naval battles were all incredibly bloody, with terrible casualties on both sides regardless of victory or defeat.

"Had they not learned from history— they are attacking downwind from the west on a day with such strong winds."

The woman in command of the entire fleet stood on in the crow’s nest situated on the main mast of the warship "White Wing", and muttered as she looked through her telescope. After confirming that the reports were correct, she handed the telescope to the sailor on watch duty, and quickly climbed down the rope ladder back onto the deck.

"… I thought it might be a feint unit attempting to lure us out, but their numbers are too great for that. I looks like a real attack— but I’m not sure if they are in the right state of mind."

Elulufay said calmly to her crew who were waiting for her with bated breath, and started wondering— did the opposing admiral hit his head in an accident? From the perspective of a sailor, attacking from downwind was just too stupid.

First of all, no sail ships in the world could sail against the wind, what they could do was to advance at an angle. Since this applies to both ships in the upwind and downwind position, the difference in advantage would be clear. In other words— the ships upwind could sail freely towards the enemy, while those downwind couldn’t.

A simple example would be playing catch. One side could throw the ball directly to the other player, while the other had to bounce the ball of the ground. The ships upwind would be the former, and those downwind would be the latter. It was clear how much of an advantage this was.

Back to the topic of sail ships, the constraints on sailing directions wasn’t the only issue ships in the downwind will face. Compared to their enemy upwind, their speed would be drastically reduced, and compounded by the fact that they couldn’t "sail directly towards the enemy". Putting it in the perspective of the ships upwind, the enemy would be moving slower than time, and approached in a zig-zag

manner. While they were doing so, they would continuously expose the vulnerable flanks of their vessel.

So how would they attack the pitiful enemy? They could use the age old method of ramming it with their ship’s bow, which would deal great damage if executed correctly. But in this battle, there would be another adverse factor. Because the ships upwind were equipped with Blast cannons, and what would happen then?

"It would be a stretch to even call that a naval battle―"

Even though the battle was right about to start, Elulufay felt it was a pity. The thought of commanding a one-sided massacre felt depressing for her. Even though that meant an overwhelming victory for her fleet, it didn’t improve her mood.

"Great Mother, all the ships are ready to set sail!""We are ready to go!""Please give the orders, Great Mother!"

Her beloved subordinates cheered her on. Elulufay cut off her melancholic feelings and shouted:

"― Set sail! Our relative position might be the reverse of what we expected, but our mission remains the same! The enemy is the nefarious Pirate Navy! Let’s show the heirs of Captain Garciev our mettle!"

""""""""The will of the Great Mother is our command!""""""""

The response was loud and harmonious. Misai that was circling in the air cawed, as if it was joining in the choir. United under the "Great Mother of White Wings", the crew sailed bravely towards the enemy fleet―

"― They are here!"

In the quarterdeck of the Imperial First Fleet’s flagship, the "Yellow Dragon", Admiral Erynphin Jurgus and his crew at their

battle stations looked at the enemy fleet formation blocking the route they were taking.

At their fore was a line of 16 three masts mid sized ships, sailing line abreast. The Kioka vessels turned towards starboard about 1 nautical mile away in unison. Their goal wasn't to set a different course, but to change the direction the ships were facing.

The Kioka ships maintained the relative distance between each other, and completed the 90 degree turn. As if they were showing their determination to not let the Imperial ships pass, the 16 ships formed a line ahead formation on the eastern waters.

"Line ahead formation…! Just like that Tetzirich kid said!"

Admiral Jurgus' eyes sharpened. Given the conventional naval tactics set primarily around boarding enemy vessels, it was hard to imagine a formation that would expose the flanks of the ship like this. It wasn't possible to close in on the enemy in such a formation, and looked like an invitation to the enemy to attack them.

However, convention had been overturned with the introduction of the Blast cannons. The Blast cannons were installed on the sides of the ships, so pointing its flank to the enemy will unleash its full power. The reason why the enemy formed a single line was to avoid hitting their allies when deploying their guns.

Behind the line of 16 ships was a fleet of ships in double line abreast formation. This fleet had 20 vessels, which made it the main force of the Kioka navy. But since it was in double line abreast formation and behind the line ahead fleet, these are the regular ship models not equipped with Blast cannons─ so the Imperial sailors still focused their attention on the 16 ships before them.

"… A-Admiral! If all these are Blast cannon ships─"

When they heard what the helmsman said, the crew around him all gulped. The wreckage of the "Tyrannosaur" bombarded by the blast

cannons flashed across their minds. But their Admiral wasn’t fazed. He was observing the other side of the ocean carefully to study the situation.

"ー It’s Impossible for there to be 16 of them."

On the other hand, aboard the Imperial vessel "New Moon" positioned at the northern end of the double line abreast formation, the dark haired youth standing in the crow’s nest of the front mast got the answer ahead of everyone else.

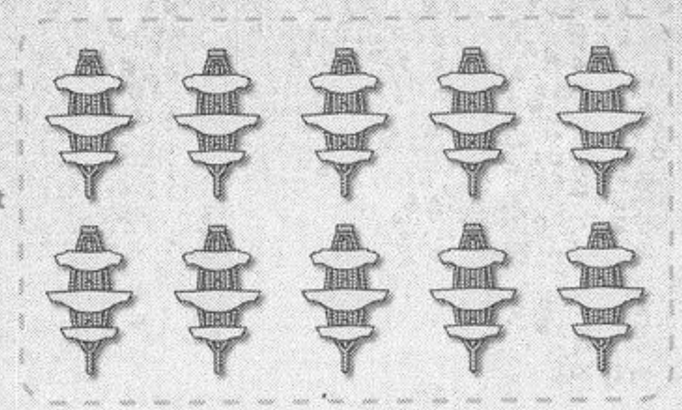
"Consider the annual iron ore mining rate of Kioka, and the labour needed to refine and process the steel. And accounting for the the priority of the Blast cannons’ allocation between the military branches, as well as the cost of building the new ships to mount the Blast cannons, even with a huge margin of error, it’s impossible for the Kioka Fourth Fleet to have 16 Blast cannon ships. The First and Second Fleet which are crucial to their national defences will have priority in getting these equipment, but the newly formed Fourth Fleet won’t have such a privilege."

As Kioka was a country that was a part of the Empire before gaining independence, the Empire has a good grasp of Kioka’s natural resources. So with Ikuta’s knowledge and Princess Chamille’s encyclopedic memory of the Empire’s data, they could cross check each other and rule out this possibility.

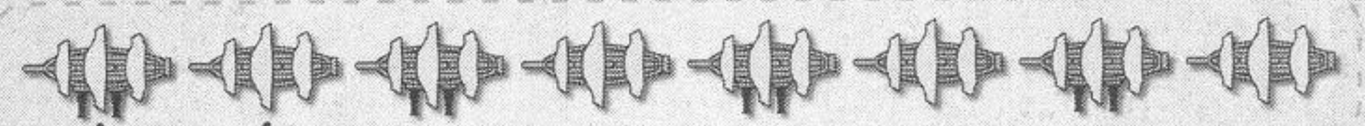
"Torway, what do you think!?"

Kioka Navy Fourth Naval Fleet

Double Line Abreast Formation



Line Ahead Formation



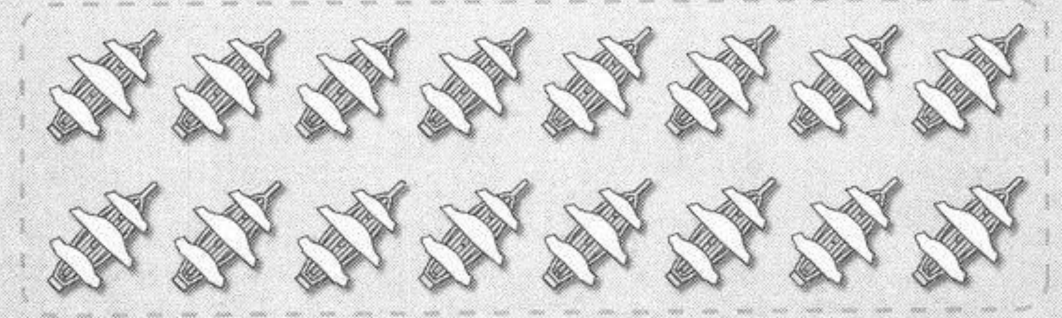
Blast Cannon Ship

Regular Ship

Upwind

Downwind

Double Line Abreast Formation





Katjvanmaninik Imperial Navy First Fleet

The youth instructed his partner Kusu to send a light message to his comrade on a neighboring ship.

"─ Yes, I can tell, Ik-kun. That formation is a combination of two different types of vessels."

To the right of Ikuta's "New Moon", its sister ship "Sun Wheel" was cruising right beside it. On the port side of the deck near to the bow, Torway was sitting in a strange posture, his legs sticking close to his butt.

In his arms was a mid sized barrel supported by a tripod, and his jade green right eye was looking through the telescope─ correction, the optical sight mounted on his new weapon.

"I can't find any glaring differences, but there is one thing that is obvious. All of them are mid sized ships, but the height from the water to the ship's deck are different. The ones that has sunk lower are probably the Blast cannons, while the others are the regular ships. The height difference is probably due to the weight of the Blast cannons."

After carefully observing the enemy vessels, he instructed one of his men to send a light message to a neighbouring ship, relaying his findings to Ikuta, and also alert the crew on his ship of this crucial "difference".

"Now that he mention it, the draft is really different…""Is it fine to differentiate them this way? Isn't it because the ship's model aren't the same?""No, if it's the ship's model, it will be more─"

The doubtful crew exchanged their opinions. At this moment, a man who just happen to be looking up opened his eyes wide and yelled:

"Hey! Look, everyone! It's a balloon! It's the air force!"

"… Hmm, since they aren’t reacting with fear, that means they have seen through our disguise?"

With the strong wind blowing in their favor, the balloon team quickly flew over Elulufay’s head. She stood aboard the Kioka flag ship "White Wing" that was slanted from the strong wind blowing on its starboard, and watch the balloons fearlessly:

"Nevermind, that’s fine too. This might seem unfair, but no one said that the battlefield is confined to the sea. Please accept the unstoppable harassment from the sky."

The aerial attack that gave the renowned general, the late Hazaaf Rikan so much trouble in the past─ An "air raid" by the air force, where they dropped fire bombs from the sky.

For all sailors, nothing was more terrifying than the ship catching on fire. They had to scoop up sea water bucket by bucket to put it out, and had to put in enough water to douse the flame, or it would be pointless. The sails would be ruined by fire, and the masts would become a giant firewood. The ship would quickly turn into sorching hell, and the crew would be left with no choice but to jump overboard.

"To be honest, I’m not expecting much. The air force here is lacking in numbers, and the accuracy of the [fire bombs] is also an issue. We need to be wary of friendly fire too, and can only use this tactic when our fleet are still far apart. Making them panic will be a passing grade, and burning a sail of one of their ships will be full marks."

Elulufay said without any worries, and watched the air force perform their tasks. The leading balloon had started dropping its altitude, and will probably start the "air raid" after reaching the effective range of Air Rifles. The balloons behind did the same.

At this moment, the Great Mother saw exploding flame along with the sound of explosion in the sky.

"— Huh—"

Her mind was blank for two seconds. Another explosion happened, and the two lowest balloons disappeared from Elulufay's sight.

"— Hurry…"

A second later, Elulufay felt a surge of lightning pass through her body. She stood with the other sailors standing on the deck and watching blankly, and shouted loudly even though she knew her words wouldn't reach them.

"Hurry and regain altitude! Escape to the sky! Quick—!"

"…Phew…"

In imperial warship "Sun Wheel", on the front deck close to the port side, the youth who strike fear into the invulnerable air force for the first time in history stared at the sky.

"They… got shot down…"

The sailors who were preparing buckets to deal with the threat of fire hazard stopped their hands, and stood idly because of what happened in the sky above. The panic a few seconds earlier was like a dream, and silence engulfed the "Sun Wheel".

"Two targets down, continue firing. Adjust the angle— right four, up three."

The sniper gave the instruction, and his assistant quickly adjusted the angle of the barrel… although the barrel was too thick for an Air Shooter. Similar to an air cannon, there were three tubes at its base that links to three wind Sprites— but the barrel was too thin to call it a cannon.

"— The other aircrafts are increasing altitude, are they running away?"

Seeing that the enemy had lost their will to fight, the eyes of the youth eased a little as he looked through the optical sight. It took a while before the crew asked him what he used to do what.

"Anti Material Air Rifle, that's the new weapon we have brought with us."

On the front deck of the Imperial warship "Spearfish", a plump youth said to the seamen asking for an explanation. The weapon itself and the sniper was right in front of them.

"As you can see, the principle of its mechanism is the same as an Air Cannon, just that the size of its ammunition is different. Instead of explosives, it uses a solid projectile. It has a much larger range as it uses the compressed air of three wind Sprites. For air targets, the effective range is a little more than 400 m. Hence, balloons filled with combustible gas is the best target."

The explanation complemented with a demonstration of the results made the crew sighed in awe. Even Pommy was surprised by the power of the trump card brought by the army men… Matthew actually did the same explanation a few days ago, but the weapon just looked like a slimmer Air Cannon, and didn't get much attention.

―Anti Material Air Rifle. Matthew called it a new weapon, but more accurately speaking, this was just a modification of an old weapon that didn't prove effective on the field.

Firing shots with multiple wind Sprites already existed a long time ago. However, it was dismissed since "there was no point if it can't be aimed accurately". But after the invention of rifling which could stabilize the bullet flight path, this idea made a come back.

―Despite its range, it didn't pack enough of a punch, so it couldn't replace Blast cannons. However, it still provided the utility of ending the invincible era of the air force―

Ikuta looked gloomy when he said that. Matthew realized that he might be mourning Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan, who was tormented by the air force until the very end. Because Matthew was also thinking about the solemn face of the renowned general he only met once in the eastern territories.

At this moment, the Captain of the "Spearfish", Naval Commander Higorum ordered the sailors who were watching idly to return to their posts. He walked to Matthew with a bold smile as he bit on his pipe.

"Kid, that's some nice fireworks you shot there. Thanks to you, our ships are spared from the fate getting burned."

"Y-You are welcomed. But the one who shot down the enemy should be the allies on the [Sun Wheel], we are not in range yet…"

"What a hassle, I will just thank all of you then. It feels great to get back at those guys wallowing in the safety of the skies!"

The Captain of the "Spearfish" laughed heartily, and then turned towards the bow of the ship:

"Alright, since the battle in the sky is over, it's our turn now— All hands, to your battle stations!"

""""""""Aye aye, Captain!""""""""

On the front deck of the Kioka Fourth Fleet flag ship "White Wing", after seeing her subordinates lost their lives in the sky, Great Mother Elulufay Tenerexilla collapsed onto her knees.

"P=Please pull yourself together, Great Mother! The [air raid] has been repelled, but we only lost two balloons! The air force only suffered minor casualties!"

"That's right! It's thanks to the Great Mother's instruction:[If you are attacked by anti-air fire, cease the attack and regain altitude]!"

The seamen around her encouraged her, but Elulufay mumbled with trembling lips:

"… The head of the formation is the third and seventh craft. Mallow, Hobkin, Hindi, Loco, Vidajaya, Ektel, Saida, Moldov, Heki, Masukka─ Are they… all dead? They didn't even get to show the results of their training, and died so quickly!"

The young admiral slammed her fist onto the deck with tears in her eyes. The names, faces and memories of the lost soldiers kept spinning in her head.

"It must be so scary and painful…! How pitiful, how pitiful…! I should have embraced you even more! No, if I knew this will happen, I would have held you in my arms forever! Those children are gone now! I won't see their smiles ever again!"

The seamen knew that her tears were sincere, and kept their peace… The "Great Mother of White Wings" loves everyone under her command equally, and she just lost ten of her precious children. No one could understand how much pain she was going through.

Pii… the cawing of a bird echoed in the sky. After hearing her pet bird admonishing her to "pull yourself together" she stood up slowly. She didn't wipe away the tears on her cheeks and glared at the enemy:

"… I will make you pay for killing my children… with your lifes!"

Seething hate spew from the mouth of the Great Mother. Her boundless love had changed to extreme hostility towards the enemy that harmed her loved ones.

"Open all the gun port on the portside, and prepare to fire! All ships, follow! Pull out all the stops, and rain death on them for taking our precious family!"

On the Great Mother’s orders, the crew had no choice but to get to work. This would be a one-sided massacre, but they were looking forward to it now.

"We have our orders! Prepare to fire!"

Two floors below the deck, the Kioka gunners in the gun deck who received their orders started bustling in the confined space. They were so closely packed that their shoulders were touching.

The Blast cannons were lined up against the side of the ship, with eight on each side. Adjusting the firing angle, cleaning the barrel and loading the munition— to perform all these task and maintain firing speed, six gunners were assigned to one cannon. Hence, the gun deck was very crowded.

"… That hurts! Hey, watch it!""S-Sorry! The ship is slanting too much…"

With every sway of the ship, the gunners collide with each other. That was to be expected, aside from the confined space, the ship was tilting towards the starboard a lot. Not just the "White Wing", all 16 ships in the line faced the same issue.

"Stop messing around! The enemy is within range!"

The roar from the supervisor snapped all of them back. It was difficult to get a good footing because of the slant, but the gunners still started working around the Blast cannons. At the same time, the gun ports at the side of the ships were opened. The sailors couldn’t help gasping when they saw how near the waters were to their feet.

"Okay, the preparations are done! —Load!"

The gunners eagerly got to work. They stuck a brush into the barrel to clean it, then shoved an American football shaped munition in.

"Inject Dynamic Air!"

The "fire hole" created Dynamic Air, which was funneled through tubes to the wind Sprite at the base of the cannon, where it was compressed. The faces of the gunners grew tense, as just one misstep and they would be blown to bits by the stored energy.

"Aim!"

The gunners looked at the aiming sights to target the enemy ships─but at this moment, they froze.

"… Huh?""Wait, that's…""We need to raise it up…? B-But…"

Their work process had grind to a halt, and only made confused noise without reporting that "Target locked". The supervisor grew anxious and lectured them: "What the hell are you dong!"

Before the situation was resolve, the order to fire was sent from the top. With no time for delays, the supervising sailor rushed his troops to act.

"… Adjust the lateral aiming during the second volley! Have you set the elevation yet? We can't dally anymore, we need to fire!"

His subordinates couldn't refute his orders. Without even checking why the gunner in charge of aiming was so confused, the supervisor was influenced by his anxiety and yelled:

"Open fire!"

… Of the 16 Kioka ships in the line ahead formation, eight of them were fake Blast cannons vessels.

At this moment, there was a thunder-like boom as 8 x 8 = 64 Blast cannons shot out flames at the same time. Each shot was strong enough to destroy a mast by itself sounded like the roar of a dragon, echoing in the sea. The image of a one-sided massacre appeared in everyone's mind.

However, the shots splashed into the sea after flying less than 200 metres.

"―What?"

Elulufay who was standing on the front deck of the "White Wing" was baffled by the first volley that didn't damage the enemy at all.

Did the anxiety of facing the enemy caused the crew to neglect their aim― she turned with that suspicion in mind, and cast her gaze at the stairs leading below deck. Almost at the same time, the gunners' supervisor dashed out, and Elulufay immediately said to him sternly:

"What's going on? The enemy is more than half a mile away! Go and adjust the aim of the guns right now!"

"… R-Regarding that…! We have an unexpected problem…!"

"What's the issue? You just need to raise the elevation of the cannons, correct!? You have done that during training for countless times!"

Elulufay lost her patience with the supervisor that didn't get to the point, and rushed down the stairs to see the situation for herself. When she reached the gun deck, the chaotic scene of gunners struggling with the cannons.

"―This is―"

Elulufay understood the situation with just one look, and how far off the mark her orders were. And that's because― her orders were already carried out. The eight Blast cannons before her were already at maximum elevation.

"…G-Great Mother! The ship is tilting too much, and the elevation of the Blast cannons are already at their limits, and can't increase further!"

"I'm very sorry, if we raise it any further, it will hit the gun port…!"

The gunners on the ground explained the situation more concisely than their supervisor's report. At this moment, Elulufay felt as if she had been struck by lightning, and all the clues linked together:

"… Could it be… The enemy already expected this…?"

Elulufay quivered from a shock she had never experienced before, and glared at the enemy fleet on the other side of the ocean through the gun port.

"… The enemy should realize the reason why we are attacking from downwind by now."

On the crow's nest at the front mast of the Imperial warship "New Moon", a dark haired youth held onto the railing with one hand to brace against the strong sea breeze as he observed the chaos of the enemy troops. Beside him was his deputy Suya, who was worried and followed him.

"The enemy's bombardment didn't reach here… First Lieutenant Ikuta, why is that…?"

"The reason isn't complicated. When the ships are blown with a strong wind from the side, it will naturally tilt downwind, and it is even worse on days with strong winds like today. The ship tilting meant the Blast cannons at their gun deck will point downwards too."

From the scene before him, Ikuta confirmed that the first phase of the plan was a success. He watched with his telescope as he continued explaining:

"If the tilt wasn't too serious, they could compensate by raising the angle of the cannons… which is why our side chose to strike today, when the wind is much stronger than usual. We gave up the advantage of being upwind from the very start, and attack from downwind in

order to shorten the range of the Blast cannons. And just as planned, their range had fallen to less than a third of their maximum."

He seemed to be insinuating that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and his deputy tried to keep up with him… Suya had been working hard all the time to not appear out of place beside her superior officer.

"… I understand the logic of sealing their bombardment, but there's some parts that I don't get. The strength of the wind needed to tilt the enemy ships enough to shorten their Blast cannon range— you have never rode on a Blast cannon ship before, so how do you know that so well, First Lieutenant Ikuta?"

A faint smile appeared on the youth's face. Suya knew that was his expression when he heard a good question:

"… When I saw the Blast cannons on the [Tyrannosaur], my first impression was that [this thing isn't optimised]. The structure of the ships equipped with the Blast cannons have flaws in its designs. The most prominent thing was that the gun ports are too small. So I suspect that when they utilize the Blast cannons, the size of the gun ports might obstruct its firing angle."

Suya gasped. In a battle where his ship almost sunk, and he was injured and at risk of dying, this youth still managed to observed such minute details on the enemy ship.

"And of course, this wasn't much of a weak point. So I consulted the experienced sailors for their opinions. As we have recorded the exact details of the Blast cannon ship's size, shape and speed, asking them to estimate how strong a breeze was needed to tilt the ship was a simple task for them."

"B-But the enemy's Blast cannon ships might not share the same designs, right? The issue with the gun port being too small might be improved in the ships that are built later…"

"That’s impossible, even if Kioka are genius in shipbuilding, they still seriously lack the experience and time to design a high quality warship armed with Blast cannons. Think about it, including their encounter with the [Tyrannosaur], that would just be the second time their Blast cannon ships are deployed in live battle. They don’t have much chance to test the viability of their ships. In other words, these vessels are just prototypes."

The youth continued explaining. The other imperial soldiers didn’t realize that these flaws only exist because the Blast cannon ships was a new weapon.

"Assuming Kioka has a genius ship architect, and he propose that [the gun ports should be larger]. Before his idea is reflected on the designs, he will face fierce opposition. After all, gun ports are holes cut out from the side of the hull, and enlarging it would increase the risk of the ship taking in water. If they want to prioritize the performance of the ship, it will be better to have smaller gun ports. Since the Blast cannons were very new weapons, most of the people on the ground in the Kioka shipyard would prioritize the performance of the ship instead. Evidence that shows [how serious the small size of the gun port affects the combat potential] will be needed to convince them. And to do so, they will need─"

"… the Blast cannon ships to be deployed in live battle─ correct? And Kioka lacks data on such battles."

Suya found the answer, and continued thinking about it. Ikuta peeked at the side of her serious face, certain that his deputy will continue to improve. The stimulation from staying by his side was a big influence to Suya Mittokarifu’s way of thinking.

"In any case, we have stopped the one sided bombardment by their Blast cannons for now─ what will the opposing admiral do now?"

"… Shift the cannons on both ends of the gun deck, and two thirds of the munitions here to the starboard side! Hurry!"

After thinking for a brief moment, Elulufay quickly issued her orders to the hapless gunners.

"Ahh… Yes!""Get a move on! You hold on to that side!""Cannon coming through! Clear some space!"

There was still a few who didn’t understand her intention, but no one idled around. This was the instructions from the Great Mother, no one would question it.

"Send all free hands on deck over too! We need to temporarily shift the ship’s center of gravity towards the starboard! That way, we can pull back the slanting ship’s body!"

Everyone understood now. She was trying to shift the center of gravity to counteract the ship that was tilting because of the strong wind. As the cannons and cannonballs were metal, they could act as counterweight just by moving their position. It was a tedious task for the sailors shifting them, but there were ample hands on the ship to perform this task.

"Relay the orders to the other ships with light signals! Tell them to shift two thirds of the ammunition and two cannons to starboard, and engage the enemy this way until they are within 200 m! Do not be alarmed even if they appear to be very close! The enemy is downwind of us! They can’t approach us directly!"

The crew had complete confidence in the Great Mother’s words, and continued moving. Elulufay watched their backs with a reliable gaze, but her mind was reeling from shock:

"… How troubling… I wanted to turn all the ships downwind, which will correct the tilting of the ships, and the range of the cannons. It will be easy to bombard the enemy from the side, but─"

In any case, she had to discard this temptation, as choosing to head downwind would result in them sailing pass the enemy in the opposite direction─ in other words, an head-on engagement.

Since being upwind was causing them issues, this would seem like a good idea. Sailing parallel to the enemy fleet, and exchange fire when they pass by each other. After that, they just need to flank behind the enemy and continue firing. They could then form a pincer attack with the 20 ships at the back of the formation against the enemy, and checkmate— if Elulufay didn't think about it further, she might have carried out this plan.

"… There are two traps. First, during the head-on engagement, there will only be one chance to fire on the enemy, which is the moment we cross by each other. The Blast cannons might be powerful, but it probably won't cause serious damage to most of the enemy fleet."

Elulufay grit her teeth to warn herself and continue mumbling:

"The other trap is the pincer attack with our 20 ally ships. This plan has a serious flaw. If we attempt to do that, the enemy will immediately break formation and engage us chaotically. When that happens, the Blast cannon vessels won't be able to fire from afar."

The accuracy of the Blast cannons weren't good enough to target just the enemy vessel in a chaotic fight. Unless they were willing to risk shooting their allies, the Blast cannon ships will be forced to watch from the sidelines. If they engage forcefully, they had to close in to increase the accuracy… that meant giving up the biggest advantage of the Blast cannons, which was range.

Elulufay no longer had any doubt that the Imperial navy took all this into account before launching their offensive… Just from a single engagement, they manage to identify the weak points of the new Blast cannon ships, so there was someone capable of doing so in the enemy fleet.

Elulufay felt a chill down her spine. She only knew one other person who could do something like this. The enemy has someone who could rival that white haired officer— this assumption stirred the

whirlpool-like fighting spirit in the chest of the "Great Mother of White Wings".

"… A momentary lapse can prove fatal, everyone, remember this well─ our enemy this time is formidable."

"Left full rudder!"

Naval Commander Higorum's command was no different from a roar, and echoed on the deck. The Imperial Ship "Spearfish" started slanting to the left greatly. The ships to the left, right and behind changed directions at the same time to sail into the wind from a different angle.

Before they entered the effective range of the Blast cannons, all the ships followed the lead of the flag ship "Yellow Dragon" and slowed down. Maneuvering the ships in such strong wind requires high level of skills, but none of the vessels fell behind. As expected of the Imperial navy, Matthew renewed his awe of their capabilities.

"… Ughh!"

In front of him, splashes were erupting in the sea. Compared to the first volley that fell into the sea less than 200m from their origins, the range increased by 50% this time. However, the number of splashes had decreased by about one quarter.

After thinking about it briefly, the pudgey youth accurately determined the meaning behind what he was seeing.

"Hmm, I remember this… right, they shift some of their cannons to starboard to counter the tilting of the ship. Ikuta called this the [most difficult situation]."

Matthew recalled the voice of the dark haired youth─ if the opposing admiral is incompetent, a lot of time would be wasted because of the shock from this unexpected development. If the admiral is mediocre, he will go for a head-on engagement, followed

by a pincer attack. But if the admiral is exemplary, he will insist on keeping the upwind position even at the expense of lowering the number of serviceable cannons. If that happens, then your wind gunners will need to work hard─

"… Wind gunners platoon four, gather at the starboard of the front deck! Take care not to disrupt the work on the ship, then spread out adequately and prepare to engage the enemy!"

On his orders, the wind gunners charged out of the stairs. Seeing his subordinates take positions on the front right side of the ship, Matthew gave his orders in a volume that wouldn't get drowned out by the wind.

"We will begin suppressing fire! Two sections will shoot in unison at one time, aim for the enemy's gun port! Ignore the sailors on their deck for now, and focus on stopping their Blast cannons, got that!?"

""""""""""Yes Sir!""""""""""

"The Anti Material Air Rifle snipers will continue observing the enemy for now, don't engage yet! Look out for the cannons aiming for this ship, and alert us! I will update the targets according to this information! Keep your eyes open and remember that well!"

""""""""""Yes, sir!""""""""""

After hearing Matthew gave the order that positively relaxed their tense emotions, his subordinates wasn't uneasy at all, and followed without question… Ikuta and Yatori weren't the only ones whose reputation grew after surviving the desperate situation in the northern territories. This slightly plump youth was also acknowledged by the troops as an officer they could entrust their lives to.

On the other hand, another person was observing Matthew from up high. Polminue Jurgus who was ostracized on this ship did her best in her post as a look out, and looked at the lively Matthew commanding his soldiers.

"… The hero of the northern unrest, huh…"

She muttered to herself. Pommy already learned on the "Tyrannosaur" that he befitted that title, and knew he had the right mentally of someone on the battlefield, unlike her.

"… But, I can… I will…!"

Her knuckles turned white from gripping the railings too hard… Pommy kept thinking about the names and faces of her dead subordinates, and continued looking for a way to apologize to them.

"Okay, begin volley fire!"

On his orders, the sharp sound of compressed air exploding echoed out. With no regards for her inner struggles, the battlefield was getting harsher with each passing moment—

"… Uwah!""Huh!""Wah… Wahh!"

On the and Kioka flag ship "White Wing" which was one of the eight Blast cannons in the line ahead formation, the screams of the gunners on the portside gun deck erupted. This was the same on all ships in the formation. Those who got shot on their limbs or torso fell onto the floor, and their comrades pulled them away from the gun ports while clicking their tongues:

"Damn it! Those imperial bastards…! They are targeting the gun ports with their wind guns!"

"Can’t we do something about this!? It will be difficult to even load like this!"

Watching their comrades getting shot made the gunners hesitate on working. The attack by Matthew and the others had the intended effect, their goal wasn’t to kill the enemy gunners, but to reduce the firing frequencies of the Blast cannons.

"There's no other way! Close the gun port while we are loading! There will be additional steps, but we won't need to worry about being shot at!"

The gunners had no choice but to follow the orders of their supervisor. As the gun ports closes, they listened to the shots landing on the side of the ship as they quickly load the munition through the muzzle of the cannon—

"… The ships on the front ranks will be entering Blast cannons range, Admiral Jurgus."

On the quarterdeck of the Imperial flag ship "Yellow Dragon", Naval Commander Kanron who had temporary left his post of supervising the sails crew warned his admiral.

"Yes, we can't avoid going through this completely unscathed now."

Admiral Jurgus had a tense face as he answered. The other vessels that had slowed down to match the "Yellow Dragon" were gradually speeding up, and would leave the flag ship behind during the next tacking turn.

"Sigh, how vexing…! If they had to match the speed of this huge ship, who knows how much damage they will take before we close in on the enemy. I know this very— but I still wish to board the ships on the front ranks that requires the most skills."

"I can't agree with that. Be it Blast cannons or Air Rifles, both are weapons best suited for taking out arrogant commanders leading at the forefront. No one can be certain whether a stray round will have a fated encounter with the admiral's head right before a charge."

"It sounds infuriating, but you have a point! Aren't you the one who said that trying to protect myself is a retarded move!?"

"Even if the admiral is relieved of duty for avoiding a battle, the First Fleet will still be fine; but if the admiral dies in battle, the fleet will be in danger. So I think both scenarios are equally retarded."

"I will crush his nuts for real next time and make him an eunuch…"

Admiral Jurgus glared at his deputy who looked nonchalant even after speaking his mind, and cast his sights ahead. The ships in the rear ranks that were beside the flag ship had surpassed them by two ship's length. The ones in the front ranks were already within 300m of the enemy fleet.

"— Alright, it is finally starting. The 300m that test that mettle and skills of the Pirate Navy."

"Listen up! Tack to the wind!"

The crew shift the sails as ordered by Naval Commander Higorum, moving the imperial warship "Spearfish" upwind at an angle. Their allies in the same rank of the formation changed course at the same time as they closed in on the 16 Kioka vessels.

"Everyone switch firing positions! Head to the starboard side!"

At the front deck, Matthew's men moved as they were ordered. As the ship will change direction while tacking, they need to deploy on the other side of the front deck. When they took aim at their new position, the soldiers shouted excitedly:

"Hah, the enemy is timid, which make things easy!""That's right, we just need to attack the gun ports that are open."

When they were loading, the enemy closed the gun port to avoid being fired upon. From the perspective of the attackers, this made things more convenient. After all, they just need to shoot at the gun ports that were open. Instead of being unsure which cannons would fire, it was easier to focus their attack this way.

"Don't let your guard down! This is the critical point! The enemy's cannon can hit us now!"

But Matthew cautioned his men from being too optimistic with a stern voice. Things were developing just as planned, but he couldn't be careless. The punches of the enemy just hadn't reached them yet.

The slightly plump youth knows very well that the cannon was powerful enough to tear the sides of the warship like paper, and just one hit could sap the crew's will to fight. He experienced all that on the "Tyrannosaur", that was why…

"— Incoming! Everyone, grab on to something— Ughh!"

Matthew saw the firing of the cannons targeting them, and shouted at the top of his voice. Not just for his men, but to mentally brace everyone else on board.

The next instant, the water on either side of the ship exploded, and the pressure from the sea rocked the "Spearfish" violently from side to side. A few soldiers fell onto the deck, and splashes from the sea rained down on them. Screams rang through the entire deck like a choir.

"… Ugh…!"

Matthew grabbed on to the rope ladder to withstand the impact, and his throat felt nauseous— just two shots hitting the waters nearby brought such an impact, and they would be closing in on the enemy who would be shooting more of these at them…!

"Man overboard! Someone fell into the sea—!"

The cry behind him shocked the pudgey youth, and he turned around quickly. He looked closely, and found a few soldiers near the railings pointing anxiously at the ocean. Matthew leaned out instinctively at the sea too.

"… Over there! Throw out a life buoy…!"

In the sea tens of metres below, he could see the sailor who had fallen overboard waving at them. He kept sinking and resurfacing with the tides, but he couldn’t keep that up for too long. A marine threw out a lifebuoy with ropes attached… But that last bit of hope fell a long way from the man overboard.

"Hey! That way! Swim that way!""Not there! To the right!""No! Don’t get swept away!"

The crew yelled, trying to lead the man overboard to the life buoy… However, that was all in vain, he was already at his limits. A wave that was taller than normal covered the head of that sailor, and dragged him maliciously into the sea.

"S-Subas...!""Damn it!"

Realizing that their comrade was gone, the sailors yelled as they stomped on the deck… Because of the strong waves and the moving ship, they were getting further from the man overboard with every second. The chance of rescue was abyssal from the start, and Matthew realized with a chill that falling overboard under such conditions was as good as dying.

"Ughh…!"

Matthew burned the image of his comrade’s cruel death into his mind, and turned his gaze back to the front deck. He looked at his men who had not recovered from the shock of the bombardment, and yelled:

"… What are you afraid of!? The longer we are afraid, the more shots the enemy will fire! There is nowhere to run in the ocean! If you don’t want to die, keep firing!"

He hid his urge to scream in terror, and issued his orders. Matthew barely managed to perform his duty as a commander, and the shell shocked soldiers started moving again after being admonished by their superior officer.

"Screw it! I won’t let that thing hit us…!""We will take them out before they hit us!"

The soldiers roared as they returned to their post, and the suppressing fire restarted after stopping for less than ten seconds. Taking into account his warning ahead of time, the pudgey youth succeeded in minimizing the shock suffered by the entire ship.

"Pommy, are you alright? Did you fell off from the impact just now?"

After confirming that his men had returned to the fight, Matthew looked upwards and yelled at the crow’s nest. A few seconds later, Pommy grabbed the railings and waved her hands to signal that she was fine. The pudgey youth shift his gaze away in relief.

"The entire fleet is within cannon range…! Are our ally ships fine!?"

"— I… I thought that I was dead."

On the imperial warship "New Moon" that was sailing at the northern end of the formation, Ikuta and Suya fell on top of each other in the crow’s nest of the front mast.

"Just the cannon fire landing in the waters nearby caused such an impact, huh… We are lucky that we have a lifeline. Suya, are you alright?"

"I-I’m fine! But…!"

Realizing that she was being held from behind, Suya got up in a hurry. Ikuta stood up alongside her, and put a hand on his waist to check for injuries.

"… Hmm, that didn’t worsen the condition of my waist. Luckily, you are as light as a feather."

"W-What are you saying!? Let’s go down, it’s too dangerous here!"

"Go down then, I will stay here. I have to observe the enemy’s reaction."

After saying that, Ikuta raised the telescope he didn’t let go off even when he fell down. Seeing that his deputy was still looking at him worriedly, the youth answered with a wry smile:

"Don’t worry and go down. I can’t leave in the middle of a chess match, you know?"

"─ No hits at all?"

Elulufay observed the first volley after the enemy entered cannon range from the "White Wing". The shots exploded on the sea without damaging any of the opposing ships.

"It can’t be helped, we have less cannons as we had to correct the tilting of the ship, and there’s suppressing fire harassing them too…"

"Should we push the troops to fire the next volley quickly...?"

Her adjutant beside her asked, but the Great Mother shook her head without any hesitation:

"Do the opposite. Keep loading as they always had, but take more care in aiming. Landing zero shots is evidence that the gunners are flustered. Also… the troops seemed to be wary of the suppressing fire, so send shields to the gunners, the numbers should match the number of gun ports."

In front of her were soldiers with tower shields protecting the admiral. The tower shield that could protect an entire person was meant to deflect shrapnels and stray rounds from hitting the commander. Elulufay ordered them to protect the gunners without any doubts.

"There’s no need to hesitate, this battle will be dependent on the usage of Blast cannons."

"Yes Mdm, it is as you say!"

Her adjutant rushed to the stairs on her orders. Elulufay looked at the gradually approaching enemy with sharp eyes, and calmly considered her next move.

"… A short while later, we should shift the cannon at the starboard back to the port side. Since the munitions had been expended, the port side should be light enough to maintain its range. We can then engage the enemy with our maximum firepower then. But─"

She evaluated the wavering scales of danger in her heart and pursed her lips with a serious face:

"─ We don't have many chances. How many enemy ships can we disable before both fleet clashes?"

As both fleets closed in on each other, their capability were both adversely affected. The Imperial fleet was sailing at maximum speed and using suppressing fire to aim for a decisive victory, while the Kioka navy was engaging with as best as they could with their Blast cannons. The judgement of the commanders, the training of the soldiers and the element of luck were all shown clearly to everyone.

"Uwah…!""The T-Thundercloud got hit!""it made a hole on its starboard!"

After entering firing range, the second volley finally scored a hit, piercing the starboard and reaching the cargo hold below deck. The crew of the "Thundercloud" leaning out from the deck immediately start working to stop the hull from taking in water. Fortunately, the hole was made relatively high above the waterline, and didn't affect seafaring too badly.

"U-Uwah…!""T-That hurts… Assholes…!""Carry the wounded! Medic!"

The third volley struck the "Mantis Shrimp" and "White Shark", killing and wounding many of the crew working on the deck. As many of the casualties on the "White Shark" were the veterans manning the sails, control over the ship was reduced significantly.

The fourth volley hit five vessels, including the "Spearfish" that was in the middle of the formation.

Something flew over Matthew’s head at a speed that wasn’t visible to the eye. That just registered in Matthew’s mind when an explosion came from the back of the ship.

"Whoaa…!"

The pudgey youth steadied himself from the shaking that threatened to throw him overboard, then cast his gaze to the back. A cloud of dust was rising behind the three masts on the ship, and the crew were rushing over there in a panic.

"Oh no, did that hit the quarterdeck…?"

He felt a chill in his limbs, but Matthew still ordered his men to keep firing before running to the quarterdeck. Pommy who literally jumped down from the crow’s nest joined him. Before long, the terrible state of the quarterdeck appeared before them.

The damage was obvious. The rear of the quarterdeck had caved in, exposing the Ship’s wheel as if a hole had been dug out. Four people were collapsed on the ground, two seemingly dead and two others groaning in pain. Matthew and Pommy could tell at a glance who one of the survivors was.

"N-Naval Commander Higorum……!"

Understanding how serious the situation was, Matthew rushed to the wounded burly Captain of the "Spearfish", whose exposed right shoulder and back were bleeding as he laid on the deck. His injuries

wasn’t from a direct hit, but the shockwave of the impact. It wasn’t clear how bad he was hurt.

"C-Curses… Luck just had to leave me at such a moment…"

Naval Commander Higorum grumbled in pain as he groped around the deck with his uninjured left hand for his pipe. Five medic soon rushed over with a stretcher, but before he submitted to their treatment, he yelled in a raspy voice like a wounded beast:

"The treatment can wait, I know I can’t continue with command! Get Kutsuchi… Get Gramps Kutsuchi here…!"

"I’m here, Gramps Higorum."

A voice that came from an unexpected direction startled Matthew and Pommy. He probably rushed here after realizing the seriousness of the situation. The Captain of the scuttled "Tyrannosaur", Naval Commander Ragieshī Kutsuchi was standing with his hand on the Ship’s wheel with his beard fluttering in the wind.

"Shut up! I’m not a gramps! The important thing is the job! Command this ship in my stead!"

These words made the faces of some of the crew turn green; the Naval Lieutenants working under Naval Commander Higorum on the "Spearfish". The young officer and the female officer who picked on Pommy last time walked forth, as if this was their chance to give their opinion.

"Captain, please leave command to me! I will perform the duty perfectly!"

"I agree with 1st Lieutenant Paume! We shouldn’t impose on our guest, Naval Commander Kutsuchi!"

Second Lieutenant Yorin concurred with the young officer. As an officer of the ship, it was natural for them to question this, but Naval Commander Higorum shook his head with a stern expression:

"Don't make me explain it all! I'm saying that you all can't take on this responsibility! If you can sail this ship 'perfectly' in such violent storms, I would have given you the position of Captain a long time ago!"

"Don't get agitated, Higorum, even if it's you, that will aggravated your wounds… Anyway, I will take the command of the [Spearfish], will that be fine?"

The white bearded old man asked quietly, and no one could interject the communications between the two old men.

"… Yes, I will leave it to you. If you fail, I will beat you up after."

"You want to talk with your fist even after going to that world? You never change, do you?"

In response to his old friend's smirk, Naval Commander Higorum averted his face with a grunt. The medics took this as a signal to load him up onto the stretcher and moved him away. The injured helmsman and the two other bodies were sent into the ship too.

"— Alright, as you can see, I will be taking command. There must be some who isn't happy about this, but just swallow your grievances for now. We don't have time to discuss this now."

The old man looked at the officers with sharp eyes as he said that. The calm intimidation that ran contrary to his advanced age silenced everyone's protest.

"… We have no objections with the esteemed [White Beard Kutsuchi] captaining the ship…"

1st Lieutenant Paume said as a courtesy on behalf of everyone else. Naval Commander Kutsuchi returned his gaze to the ship's wheel with a nod.

"Well then, 1st Lieutenant Paume, take the post of the helmsman. Can you let your deputy take your original post?"

"Aye aye Sir!"

"Very good, all hands return to your posts immediately─ Get on with it! If you keep standing there, this ship will be done for with another hit!"

The veteran sailor’s shout snapped the crew back to their senses, and they ran back to their posts. Matthew who was affected turned around too─ and found a woman standing motionlessly beside her, and stopped in his tracks.

"What are you doing, Naval Lieutenant Polminue. Return to your station."

Naval Commander Kutsuchi state his orders calmly. In that instant, Pommy felt so ashamed for holding expectation after the old sailor assumed command, that she wanted to kill herself. She immediately turned and ran.

"… Ugh…"

Matthew wanted to say something, but realized that he didn’t have anything to say. He shook his head to clear his mind, and rushed to the front deck where his subordinates were standing by.

The First Imperial Fleet worked desperately to reorganized their battered formation as they slought towards the enemy upwind. They were only 30m away, close enough to see the faces on the opposing ships. At this moment─ the cannons fired simultaneously, announcing the end of this situation.

"Wargghh! Hold the line!""T-Two shots landed on starboard!""Damn it! The main mast got hit!"

This was a precise volley from point blank range. Eight ships got hit, with two of them losing their main and rear masts, stopping them in the waters. The flanks of three vessels were hit below the waterline, and were condemned to the inevitable fate of sinking. Despite that...

"Admiral! There are 38 ships left!""Well done! Charge them!"

On the quarterdeck of the Yellow Dragon that caught up one step later, Admiral Jurgus was hyped up. He knew that his fleet has passed the first checkpoint, which was to close in with the enemy while maintaining numerical advantage.

After the repeated bombardment, two imperial ships were dead in the water and four suffered critical damage. Seven were moving slowly after their sails and ropes suffered serious damage. That was the result of the 300m charge.

"… Impressive, they only suffered that much damage."

With the results laid out before her, Elulufay could only admit that this was less than half the damage she expected. Aside from her being too naive, she realized that her opponent was more tenacious than she imagined. However, she didn't have any buffer time for her next orders:

"Half firing! Execute plan four, when the enemy has the advantage in combat potential! Get the fleet moving!"

The gong used to relay the message was rang, telling the allied ships what to do as the enemy fleet close in on them. Rain started falling amidst the wind that had gotten stronger, announcing the start of round two of their battle.

On the imperial warship "New Moon", Ikuta who insisted on monitoring the situation from the crow's nest saw the 16 Kioka ship in line ahead formation performed two types of maneuver. The eight Blast cannon ships started retreating against the wind, and the eight regular vessels moved forward to cover their retreat.

"… They refuse to give up the upwind position! There should be a limit to their patience! Really now!"

The youth who was hoping for a head-on battle cursed the opposing admiral’s determined attitude, which went against his expectations. He could also tell the goal of the enemy. The regular ships will engage in battle in order to buy time for the valuable Blast cannon ships to retreat upwind.

"The 20 ships standing by behind had started moving too. They will probably join the 8 regular vessels for close quarters combat… This is the development we wanted too, but we can’t let the Blast cannon ships get away so easily."

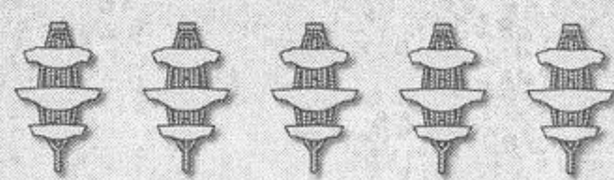
The youth kept his telescope as if to express that he would stop watching from the sideline and join the fray. He climbed down the rope ladder with a speed that could rival a cockroach and returned to the deck. His men who were preparing for boarding action under Suya’s instruction looked his way, but he left that part to his reliable deputy and ran to the quarterdeck.

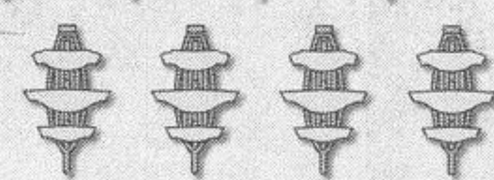
"Captain Aguhi! The Blast cannon ships are getting away, can we dodge the enemy ships before us and pursue them?"

"Hey, you are asking for the moon here, kid! You know the ships upwind can move more freely than those downwind, right? In this situation, the enemy will stop us even if they had to ram our ship!"

The buffed Captain of the "New Moon" replied cheerfully. Up until today, Ikuta had built a good rapport with the ship captain with his glib tongue and the power of the "Divine Wine of the Far Southern Sea".

Kioka Navy Fourth Naval Fleet





Retreat



Advance

前進









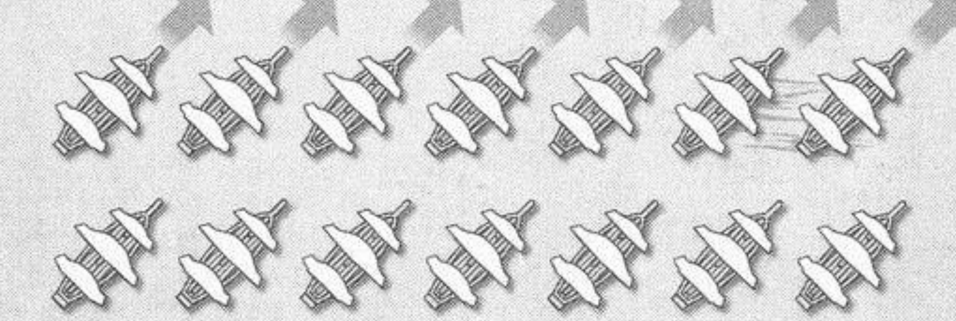




Upwind

CLASH

Downwind





Katjvanmaninik Imperial Navy First Fleet

Understanding how aggressive his personality was, the dark haired youth provoked him:

"Yes, I know! This is difficult, but for Captain Aguhi, the number one sailor in the First Imperial Fleet, this might be possible! Or was I expecting too much!?"

"…! What did you say, you little shit? I never said it can’t be done! Don’t make stupid assumptions!"

Captain Aguhi’s mind shifted from cautiousness to being adventurous. With how easy he was to influence, the Captain would probably do the same thing unprovoked. Ikuta smiled wryly without any surprise. After all, the Katjvarna Pirate Navy were made up of fools like him.

"Stand aside and watch with your eyes wide open! I will show you my special technique! Don’t blink now!"

The Captain declared, and then summoned more crew to reinforce the men at the front and rear masts, with a sharp gaze towards the approaching enemy─ The "New Moon" was at the limits of their upwind manuever, and the only thing they could do was to turn downwind. However, their enemy saw through that and rammed at them from a difficult to dodge angle.

"Hmmp! Good─ hard to starboard!"

However, in this situation where the rudder could only be turned to port, Captain Aguhi gave the order that betrayed that expectations. Even so, the helmsman wasn’t fazed at all as he turned the ship’s wheel all the way to the right.

"Deploy all the sails on the front masts, and take in the wind from its back! Do the opposite for the rear mast, let the wind through!"

The crew executed their instructions without delay, putting on a show. The sails on the front masts took in all the wind coming from

the port side, while the sails on the rear mast turned parallel to the wind direction, letting all the air through. As a result─ with the rudder turned hard to the right, the front of the ship turned all the way downwind because of the force exerted on its sails.

"W-Whoaa…?"

The violent movement of the ship made Ikuta lose his balance, and he grabbed onto the rope ladder to keep his footing. A gasp came from the Kioka ship that was right before them─ The New Moon turned its bow downwind in one fell sweep, and the stern of the ship was thrust upwind, doing a 180 degree turn right in from of the enemy. In the eyes of the enemy, it was like the flank of the imperial ship they were about to ram had suddenly disappeared.

"We are going to pass by them, begin suppressing fire!"

Soldiers with wind guns and crossbows aimed at the starboard of the enemy ship and shot a volley from point blank. The enemy retaliated immediately, but the New Moon’s target was the Blast cannon ships. It right its course to head upwind, minimizing the time they engaged the enemy, and started sailing again. The enemy ship tried to right its course in a panic too, but failed and got rammed by the imperial ship behind instead.

"As you wished, we are on the tail of the Blast cannon ships! Any complaints, landlubber brat!?"

Captain Aguhi said smugly as he flexed his biceps. Ikuta saluted him without any hesitation. The Blast cannon ships upwind seemed to have trouble maneuvering because of the bad weather, and its distance from the New Moon had been shortened significantly.

"Hurry! The enemy is catching up!"

As the ships were stationary during their bombardment, many of the Blast cannon ships had a lot of trouble turning upwind, including the ship being pursued by Ikuta’s "New Moon". As the rudder wasn’t

responsive unless the ship reached a certain speed, they couldn’t perform tacking upwind immediately.

"Huff… Huff…!""We can’t let them catch us!""Move! Hurry…!"

The pressure was on, and the Kioka crew members focused on their work. The retracted sails were deployed, and the ship gradually sped up. The sensation of the ship accelerating made them relieved.

"W-We made it in time...!""We can get away at this distance!""Turn to starboard! Quickly!"

The helmsman tightened his grip on the ship’s wheel… No matter how much his comrades urged him, the helmsman wouldn’t turn the rudder at his own digression, and would wait for the Captain to confirm the speed and sails first.

"― Alright, turn to starboard two notch!""Yes Sir!"

It was the instruction all the crew had been waiting for, and the helmsman executed the order readily. However, the wheel felt unnaturally light.

"…? Hey, what’s going on!? We are not changing course!"

The Captain shouted a little anxiously. During this time, the helmsman continued turning the wheel frantically, but failed to steer the ship at all. It was turning freely― the helmsman noticed that, and went to the back of the wheel to check the base connected to the ship.

"… C-Captain…!""What is it!?"

When he heard his superior snapping back at him, the helmsman raised both hands with a tense face. The Captain saw the rope connected to the wheel had been snapped.

"I-It snapped…? How can this be!? When did that happen!?"

It was only natural for him to wail. The ship's wheel and the parts connected to the rudder would affect the navigation of the ship, and was carefully maintained. It was impossible that the rope snapped, and at the crucial moment when they were about to evade the enemy's pursuit.

This unexpected turn of events made their minds stall. At this moment, apart of the ship's wheel shattered suddenly. The shrapnel hit the Captain who screamed, and the helmsman beside by him finally realized what happened:

"… S-Sniped by the enemy? Did the rope snap because…!"

"The enemy had stopped turning upwind! It is very likely that we have succeeded in destroying the rudder controls!"

On the front starboard deck of the imperial warship "Rising Sun", the lookout at the top of the front mast reported his observations. The young sniper who had taken a position up high nodded a little.

"Okay, I will aim at the next ship…!"

The Anti Material Air Rifle was mounted onto the railing of the crow's nest. Torway Remeon aimed through the sights with one eye, searching for his next prey. Including his partner Safi, there were three wind sprites funneling compressed air into the mid sized barrel.

Like the name "Anti Material" suggest, this weapon was better suited to destroying objects than it was at taking down enemy personnel. It was highly dependent on the skill of the user, but given how much the distance between the ships had shortened, it could even be used to snipe the ropes of a rudder as demonstrated earlier. While a deputy could take the place of a commander that had fallen in battle, the damaged rudder would be out of commission unless it was repaired.

"They couldn't use the rudder, so they can't flee upwind. We have to disable as many Blast cannon ships here as possible…!"

Moments after finding his next target, Torway squeezed the trigger with his index finger. Every shot by snipers like him were like chains around the feet of the enemy attempting to escape.

"— T-Three Blast cannon ships had been stalled by the enemy! Another two are being hotly pursued…!"

On the quarterdeck of the Kioka flag ship "White Wing" that was the first to escape upwind, the crew watching the situation through telescope cried in anguish. Elulufay grit her teeth as she listened to the reports.

"As expected, not all the ships escaped in time…!"

This was within her expectations. As the enemy were closing in on time, the time frame for them to stop shooting and escape upwind was very tight. And in terms of ship models, the Imperial's three mast ships were better suited for upwind sailing when compared to Kioka's three mast ships. Elulufay was mentally prepared for a ship or two to fail in escaping. However, the harassment of the Anti Material Air Rifle and the skills of the imperial sailors increased the numbers beyond her estimates.

"We lost three, it will be bad if we lose more. We have to save at least half…!"

Elulufay's plan was for the Blast cannon ships to make a strategic retreat to the back of the twenty vessels, then regroup into line ahead formation upwind.

Given the circumstances, the imperial fleet aiming to seize the harbor had to break through the twenty ships of the Kioka fleet first. And they would have to face the Blast cannon ships after charging through. It was unlikely for a large number of ships to slip by, so Elulufay's task force just needed to take out the few vessels that made it through with their Blast cannons.

However, they would need a minimum number of Blast cannon ships for this plan to be feasible. Unless four or more ships escaped, the plan would fall through. Three of the Blast cannon ships had already been caught by the enemy, so whether the remaining two vessels could escape would decide the battle.

"Please, Greg…! You must keep them safe!"

The entire situation was clear to her, and Elulufay called out the name of her most trusted Marine Commander.

"Alright! We are right on their tail! Don’t let them get away!"

On the imperial warship "Conch shell", the sailors yelled in high spirits. The Blast cannon ships they were pursuing was right before them. The enemy ship slowed after the Anti Material Air Rifle broke the rope controlling the rudder, and the "Conch shell" didn’t let this chance get away.

"Listen up boys, we are going in! Prepare for boarding action!"

The shooters continued suppressing fire from the front deck, while the marines with cutlass gathered behind them. After facing the threat of long range bombardment numerous times, their fighting spirits started to swell at the prospect of melee combat with the enemy.

"Hmmp! Finally!""They blew a hole on the ship…!""I will make them taste my blade!"

As they were at the stern of the fleeing enemy ships, they didn’t have to worry about the Blast cannons fixed on the flanks of the enemy ship. If they could maintain this position, this would be the best angle for a boarding angle attack. One of the marines was too anxious and leaned out of the ship’s bow…

"Don’t get cocky, you bastards!"

But he fell overboard because of a strong impact from the side of the ship.

"Uwah─!""It's the enemy ship! It rammed us!""The enemy is boarding─!"

The air erupted on the ship. While their attention was on the Blast cannon ships before them, another Kioka ship crashed into them from the side. The ram on the enemy ship pierced deeply into the flank of the "Conch shell", and armed sailors ran onboard across the decks that were now connected.

"How dare you ignore us in your chase! You are too naive, imperial scum! Do you think the Kioka navy only has Blast cannon ships!?"

With a grin that literally goes to his ear, Marine Commander Greg roared intimidatingly. The boarding Kioka marines started engaging the crew of the "Conch shell".

The Blast cannon ships slipped over during this chaotic engagement─

"… Urgh! The [Conch shell] and [Flying Fish] had been rammed by the enemy ships! The Blast cannon ships are getting away!"

Matthew who was observing the battle from the bow of the "Spearfish" shouted, and Naval Commander Kutsuchi who saw the same thing from the other end of the ship issued his orders:

"Tacking into the wind! This is the only ship in position to catch that Blast cannon ship!"

On the orders of the old sailor, the officer taking the helm steered to the right. Up until now, the "Spearfish" had avoided the ramming of two enemy ships with impressive ship maneuver. As a result, it became one of the handful of ships that could catch the Blast cannon ships before it reaches the protective shield of the 20 ship formation.

"We have to pursue in this ship, huh...! We need to get ready too!"

Matthew realized that the Captain was now in pursuit issued new orders to his men on the front deck. Numerous muzzles and the sights

of the Anti Material Air Rifle were pointed onto the back of the fleeing enemy ship.

"― How troubling, I thought they got away, to think another enemy ship is still pursuing."

On the quarterdeck of the Kioka flagship "White Wing", Elulufay muttered as she observed the situation. Before her was a Blast cannon ship fleeing upwind, and the imperial warship "Spearfish" in hot pursuit.

"To sail so freely in such terrible weather… In contrast, our ships have to do everything they can just to control the ship, and couldn't focus on firing their cannons."

Elulufay grit her teeth. As the Blast cannons were designed to be deployed on the side of the ship, they couldn't fire on the enemy ship pursuing them from behind. If they wish to engage, they need to change their relative position with the enemy, but that would slow down their escape upwind.

If the sea was calmer, the Kioka crew would have better control over the Blast cannon ship and might be able to fire as they navigate deftly― also known as "run and gun"… However, it had not been long since the Blast cannon ships were deployed for practical use, so it was unreasonable to demand them to master that completely. Just not making any serious navigational mistakes was exemplary enough.

"― Alright, let's save them. Set course downwind."

She decided as if this was an obvious decision, and her adjutant rushed to her side:

"M-Mdm, are you sending this ship to save them? That's too dangerous! Even if we help our allied ship escape, if we get bogged down by the enemy…!"

"We have to take this risk. Three Blast cannon ships had been stopped by the enemy, whether that ship escapes or not will be the key to deciding this battle."

"I understand that, but the [White Wings] is our flag ship! If anything happens to her or you, our Great Mother, all will be lost! If we have to send reinforcements, it should be the other Blast cannon ships… Uwah!"

At this moment, the waves hitting the side of the "White Wing" made it shook violently. Elulufay gently supported her adjutant who almost fell down, and whispered into his ears:

"… Sailing downwind, fending off the enemy so our allies can escape, then returning upwind. Other than the [White Wings], which other ships can pull this off in such volatile waters? Who else is capable of such seamanship?"

The deputy failed to answer and remained silent. The Great Mother gently kissed his forehead, then told him gently as if she was soothing a child:

"… Alright, don't need to worry. With me commandeering the ship, there's no need to fear no matter how treacherous the sea is. As you know, this ship has the blessings of the wind."

Elulufay said with firm determination, then looked up at her pet bird circling above her:

"Let us begin, Misai! Tell us where to go!"

Pepe

… a cawing came from the sky. After hearing that cry, Elulufay had readied herself, ordering the rudder to be steered downwind.

"Fire volley! Stop the enemy ship!"

On Matthew’s orders, the sound of compressed air exploding reverberated in the air. The wind gunners gathered at the front deck were firing at the enemy ship 50m in front of them.

"The area around the ship’s helm is well protected...! Okay, aim for the ropes controlling the rear mast! If we stall them, we can catch up!"

As per his instructions, the Anti Material Air Rifle sniper who took up more space than his comrades switch targets. His skills wasn’t at the level of Torway, but he was still a top class sniper that had gone to tedious training. It didn’t take long for him to succeed.

"… It’s a hit! The ropes of the rear mast is severed!"

Matthew could see that one of the ropes tied to the rear mast had lost tension and was swaying in the wind. With the sail taking in less wind, the enemy ship was losing speed. The pudgy youth clenched his fist.

"Well done! We can catch─"

"Blast cannon ship approaching from the port side! Watch out for cannon fire─!"

While Matthew was preparing for a boarding battle, Pommy who was on look out duty inside the crow’s nest shouted a warning. He looked to the port side stiffly, and saw a Kioka ship heading this way from upwind. The slightly plump youth opened his eyes wide in surprise:

"That ship…! It already got away, but returned to help its allies? Oh no, we are in their range…!"

The shocked Matthew urged his men to raise their guard. At the same time, Naval Commander Kutsuchi who noticed the approaching enemy had an ominous feeling:

"Enemy reinforcements…! Be careful, lads! That ship is already turning! It won’t be long before they shoot at us!"

The air on the "Spearfish" grew tense. Moments later, booming noise came from the ship that finished turning. "Grab onto something!"— after the old sailor yelled that, an impact from the side shook the ship violently.

"Uwahhhh…! D-Damage report!"

After the impact, Matthew gave an order through gritted teeth. From his experience thus far, he could tell the difference from the shaking of a near miss and a direct hit. That shot just now was a direct hit, and the question was how serious the damage was.

"T-The ship is hit once on the port side, near the stern! It bored a hole into the ship!"

"Is it above the waterline! Are we taking in water?"

"Slightly above! Water… as of now, no!"

His subordinate reported with a grim face. We avoided a fatal blow, huh

— Matthew evaluated the damage as such, but he still felt uneasy. There was no telling if they could survive the next hit.

"Damn it! What should we do…!"

The pudgy youth scratched his head violently. This wasn't covered in Ikuta's plan of pursuing the enemy one on one. After considering it for a few seconds, he decided to consult the commanding officer and rushed to the quarterdeck— when he reached there, his last bit of optimism was gone.

"…! Hey, what happened…?"

When he saw the crew surrounding the ship's wheel, Matthew felt a chill down his back. This was just like earlier, when Naval Commander Higorum got injured. The youth pushed through the wall

of sailors, and found the old commander panting in the middle of the circle.

"N-Naval Commander Kutsuchi! Are you hurt from that impact earlier…?"

Matthew didn't see any wounds, but the old man didn't respond as he curled up in a ball with his hand on his chest. Matthew felt baffled, and Pommy rushed over from the crow's nest the next moment.

"What's wrong, Grampa Kutsuchi!?"

The old man finally reacted to her frantic shout. He tried desperately to control his breathing, and slowly squeezed out every word.

"… I'm not… wounded… but… that impact aggravated my illness…"

Just saying that was agonizing for Naval Commander Kutsuchi who was clutching his chest with both hands. His words and his current situation made Matthew and Pommy gasped:

"… You have a sickness in the chest…? How… When did you contract that…!"

Unlike the agitated Pommy, Matthew finally understood something─ he always felt something was off. This aging Captain had handed over the ship's command to his young subordinate and became a sort of hermit. However, his clear headed command during the engagement with the Blast cannon ship, his energetic shout that motivated the stunned sailors, and his seamanship that guided the vessel out of that desperate situation all proved that he was very much ready for active duty.

"Due to Naval Commander Kutsuchi's health issues, 1st Lieutenant Paume will take over command! Everyone, return to your stations, we will charge towards the enemy ship before us─!"

The young officer shouted when he saw the old sailor was down. This was the right decision, since they couldn't continue the fight without anyone taking the role of the captain. However— at this moment, Pommy realized something and pounced towards the ship's wheel, grabbing onto it from the side.

"What─! What are you doing!"

"Turn the rudder right! Hurry, there's no time!"

Pommy didn't even wait for an answer, and pulled the wheel with all her strength. The sudden interruption infuriated the young officer, and he raised his right hand in a rage.

"What the hell! Stop that, you failure of a woman!"

His fist hit the cheek of the girl. A chipped off tooth flew in the air, and the legs of the dazed Pommy wavered. But she still held onto the wheel with both hands. Her momentum overpowered the young officer who had raised a hand to strike her, and the wheel turned right.

At this instant, a sudden gust of wind howled from portside to starboard. The masts and beams creaked as the ship slanted to the right from the pressure of the wind. The sailors who almost fell overboard screamed.

After the sudden burst of wind died down a few seconds later, Pommy let go of the wheel and collapsed onto the deck. The pudgy youth rushed to her side. Naval Commander Kutsuchi looked at the couple and the slack mouthed young officer, and said stutteringly:

"… The wind direction changed, huh… That was dangerous… If the rudder wasn't turned to the right, a sail would have torn, or a rope would have snapped…"

When he heard that, both the young officer and Matthew felt a chill down their spine… Normally, the correct procedure was to retract the sails and anchor the ship to tide over the treacherous winds, but the

"Spearfish" was still sailing with its sails fully deployed. This was necessary to maintain speed, but such reckless actions wasn't without risk. Wind that was too strong wouldn't show mercy to sail ships, and the sail would tear if it was pushed over its limits.

"Belay that order, Naval Lieutenant Paume… I didn't say that I will hand command over to you."

"… Ughh! B-But Naval Commander Kutsuchi……"

"I know. With how I am, it is only natural for you, the 1st Lieutenant to take over. Usually, I won't hesitate about handing command to you… But I can see from the wind that this situation isn't the usual."

The old sailor cast his eyes upwards, and the dark clouds made it clear that the weather wouldn't be clearing up anytime soon.

The reality of the situation seeped in, and the crew started to waver. It was thanks to the efforts of the two great sailors, Horatio Higorum and Ragieshī Kutsuchi, that the "Spearfish" had managed to last this long. But they had lost both of their guardian wings now—

"There isn't time to hesitate… I know that, but I can't make a decision on who should be captain in such a crucial moment…"

Naval Commander Kutsuchi turned his eyes to another direction, where Pommy was getting up with Matthew's assistance and wiping away the blood from her mouth. The young officer leaned close to his superior officer with a pale face:

"A-Are you going to ignore me and hand this ship to her…? I can't accept this! How can you leave the ship in this failure that sunk her own ship…!"

"I object too!"

A female officer with a fierce face butt in, it was 2nd Lieutenant Yorin.

"In the military, we should follow the chain of command! And putting the lives of our entire crew in the hands of that woman… Impossible! Just the thought of that gives me goosebumps!"

Yorin said with a disgusted look, with her murderous eyes directed towards Pommy. With the strong objections of the two Naval Lieutenant, Naval Commander Kutsuchi showed a complicated expression with a hand on his chest:

"Both of you have a point… However, the situation is beyond your capabilities, just like that wind just now…"

"No, that was just a fluke… No, if that woman didn't interfere, I will have noticed on my own! I won't fail, and will do better…!"

The young officer wouldn't back down, and Naval Commander Kutsuchi didn't shut him down by pulling his rank. Because he was the one who was being indecisive.

After thinking about it for a while, he didn't look to any of the crew member, but cast his gaze on the youth from the army instead:

"─I will let you decide, Matthew Tetzirich. Who should I entrust the ship to?"

"… Huh?"

"I really can't decided. My sentimental emotions are getting in the way of my unbiased judgement. So I will leave it to an outsider like you. You, who have suffered under the harsh treatment of Naval Lieutenant Polminue because of her immaturity on the [Tyrannosaur]…"

Being given the authority to decide out of the blue made Matthew stop thinking. At the same time, the two Naval Lieutenant from the "Spearfish" noticed that Matthew would be choosing, and got closed to him as if they had spotted an opportunity:

"Hey! Please pick me! You don't want to die here, right?"

"If you leave it to Pommy, the ship will sink in no time! You must know since you were on the [Tyrannosaur]! Please, hero-sama, entrust the ship to Paume! You have nothing to lose…!"

Their agitated attitude made Matthew awkward, but he continued his inner dialogue.

―Who should I hand the ship to? He and his men's lives will be in the hands of the person he select.

"……"

He thought back of her first meeting with Naval Lieutenant Polminue. When they were first introduced, he thought she was a gentle girl that ran contrary to the reputation of the Pirate Navy, and felt relieved. However, his impression turned 180 when he boarded her ship, and he and Torway were abused every day. Her unreasonable attitude even spurred Matthew's killing intent, and her unsightly appearance during a real battle disappointed him… But that was exactly why Matthew didn't give up on Pommy back then. After all, her immature behaviour reminded Matthew of his past self.

His eyes returned to the present, and the two officers of the "Spearfish" was pleading at him strongly. 1st Lieutenant Paume and 2nd Lieutenant Yorin. He didn't know them well enough to judge their characters, but he could sense how much they hated Pommy. Thinking back on his days on the "Tyrannosaur", Matthew felt that was only natural. Hence, he couldn't use this as the reason to dismiss them. In any case, this wasn't a situation where he should base his judgement on personal preferences.

Matthew thought about it one step further― What's the difference between the two of them and Pommy? Their skills in seamanship wasn't the deciding factor. If that was the case, Naval Commander Kutsuchi wouldn't have given Matthew the authority to choose. It should be something that even he could understand… No, he needed

to base on something that "only he could understand" to decide between them.

He observed the three of them again. Pommy appeared to be younger, but they were around the same age. In other words, none of them had any track records of live battle that made them stand out. This should be the first war that they were participating in. What was the difference between the three of them?

He didn’t need to think too much, the answer was whether they had failed before. Whether they had lost a ship because of their failings and immaturity. This was a black mark against Pommy that Naval Lieutenant Paume and Yorin didn’t have. She had failed before, but they didn’t— The two officers before him was using this as their argument to assume command of the ship.

I have never failed before, so leave it to me.

Matthew considered this argument, but couldn’t accept it. A sense of wrongness he couldn’t express in words was stuck in his chest. As he search for an answer, his gaze wandered in the air— at this moment, he noticed Pommy who was standing a slightly further away in the distance.

Pommy was just standing there without giving any opinion or explanation. She was prepared to accept any outcome, and was steeling herself quietly for Matthew to make his call.

"…… Phew……"

When he saw that serious face, the youth found his answer. He state it without any hesitation:

"Naval Lieutenant Polminue, you will take over command."

Matthew put all of his resolve into this nomination. Pommy’s shoulder quivered when she was named, while the other two stood

stiff for a moment before trying to protest fiercely. But Matthew explained pre-emptively:

"… You won’t fail, and will do better. Naval Lieutenant Paume and Yorin, that’s what you said, right?"

The pudgy youth looked into their eyes and started his explanation with that. He then said with determination and energy:

"Up until now, I have failed countless times, from slight errors to serious mistakes. The people around got into danger because of my failings, and some of my men even lost their lives. I lost count of the number of times I felt regret and reflected on my actions… However, I learned one truth from all this experience."

The desperate battle in the northern territories flashed across his mind, and the lessons branded into his soul from those days bore fruit here.

"─Failure will always be a painful experience. Those who avoid failure will also obstruct their possibility for growth… So instead of those who have never failed, I have more faith in those who have failed before. If I have to choose in this crucial moment─ I will leave my fate in the person who faced the experience of a serious failure head on without flinching."

After saying that, Matthew looked to the girl. Pommy was desperately trying to still her trembling shoulders as she saluted him. She accepted the will entrusted to her by the youth with a heart filled with gratitude.

"…… Sigh…"

The old sailor had nothing to add to this. He already left everything to them, so he just nodded with a faint smile on his lips.

Just as the wind was changing─ The "Spearfish" was hit for the third time.

"Hmmp! How boring…!"

Greg muttered arrogantly as he waved his bloody axe around. After the Kioka's"Ravisher" rammed the imperial warship "Conch shell", the marines boarded and attacked while their enemy was still in disarray, and seized the advantage.

"We got their front deck! The enemy has been pushed back to the quarterdeck and the cabins below, shall we start sweeping them?"

"Just make a show of doing so. If we go in too hard, they will get desperate and put up a determined fight. We need to pick an opportune moment to get them to surrender."

Greg picked his ears with his finger as he admonished his hot blooded men. Contrary to his fearsome appearance, his principle was to keep needless fighting to the minimum on the battlefield.

"It's fine even if the enemy don't surrender. We can leave after destroying the sails and masts, making sure that they won't be able to sail─ Hurry it up! Our work isn't done after taking down just one ship!"

Spurred by his stern voice, the Kioka marines moved quicker. At this moment, someone shouted at the back of the Marine Commander supervising at the front deck:

"Commander! Another imperial ship is approaching from the starboard!"

"What…?"

Greg turned his gaze to the starboard after hearing the report, and saw the bow of a warship charging straight for them. He clicked his tongue at the sight of the incoming enemy:

"We already tore through the belly of this ship, if they are here to help their comrades, they are a tad too late… Hey, you lot! We can

stop fighting now! Cut all the ropes that you can see, then go back to our ship! I will leave anyone who is too slow behind!"

He didn’t hesitate at all when he assessed the situation. The marines that boarded the imperial warship moved more hectically. They destroyed what they could in a short amount of time and then left the enemy vessel. When everyone returned to their ship, the approaching imperial vessel was right before them.

"Good, hard to port!"

The Captain shouted his orders, and the ship started moving shortly after. The ram that was struck into the side of the imperial warship had been pulled out during the boarding action, and wouldn’t affect navigation.

The "Ravisher" pushed the "Conch shell" a little to the side and turned its rudder to the left. For the enemy approaching from the front right, this was just like using the imperial warship as a shield.

"The enemy can’t head towards us directly, as their ally ships will be in their way. If they want to pursue, they will need to make a detour. But since they are sailing upwind, their angle of attack is already pushed to the limits, so they had to detour by going downwind… In other words, no matter how much they struggle, we will have the advantage."

Greg made the best logical move and smile smugly. After sailing past the disabled "Conch shell", the imperial warship went around her allies to pursue them. However, they seemed to be sailing against the wind at an even tighter angle than before, so the distance between them was closer than expected.

"Tch! They just won’t give up…!"

The crew was more skilled, and the imperial warship had better performance than Greg expected, as they sailed deftly against the wind. He had no choice but to accept this fact and quickly amended

his plan─ at this distance, it will be difficult to turn their course downwind to ram them. They would probably sail parallel to the enemy ship, and fight a boarding battle.

"… Never mind, if they want to play it this way, we can indulge them! You lot, fight and win the battle for the Rear Admiral!"

The marines' morale rose at the sight of their commander pumping his fist up high. Their firm devotion to the "Great Mother of White Wings" and the leadership of the Marine Commander kept their spirits up, allowing them to fight one more battle with energy to spare.

"Wind gunners and crossbows, are you in position!? Aim and fire!"

On Greg's orders, the arrows and bullets were shot towards the enemy vessel downwind. The retaliation came at almost the same time. There were some casualties during this exchange, but this much wouldn't make them falter.

"Ship approaching! Prepare for boarding action─!"

The marines picked up their cutlass for the inevitable melee battle, and they could see the imperial soldiers preparing for the same thing on the enemy vessel. The distance between the two ships grew narrower by the seconds. The marines fighting spirits rose during this stifling moment.

They were less than 3m apart. Judging that it was almost time, the soldiers rushed forth with the planks to board the enemy ship. The bullets flying overhead worried them as they lowered the broad planks onto the enemy ship─ but during this unexpected time, a red figure landed amongst them silently.

"Huh─"

Before he could even exclaim in surprise, the throat of the soldier holding the plank was slit. The marines who saw the spluttering blood were also stabbed in the heart through the ribs.

"Uwah─""─Ehh?""Ughh…!"

As they were attacked, death continued to spread, in the order of the ones who noticed the threat. Hence, the group was still unaware of what was happening on their ship.

"I-It's the enemy! They are here─ uwah!"

The eighth marine who was cut down finally alerted his comrades of the situation. After he said his last words, the dangerous red figure quickly took form in the eyes of the marines. Her fiery colored hair fluttered in the wind as she held a bloodied saber in her right hand, and a short sword in her left.

"What…""D-Dual swords─""That's…!"

Before the Kioka whose eyes grew wide from fear, the red cyclone─ Yatori Shino Igsem pointed her blades at the enemy with her guard up.

"The time for talk is over, now we speak with our swords!"

The sword flashes blew away her enemy's careless attitudes. In response to her aura, the Kioka marines braced themselves for battle. However, while their attention was on Yatori who broke onboard by herself, the imperial soldiers continued flooding in from the "Fierce Tiger".

"What's wrong with you lot!? Why are you just dallying around!?"

Greg who was behind the vanguards couldn't see the situation in front, and felt anxious at the passiveness of his men. His doubts were cleared up the moment he got onto a tall platform. From his high vantage point, he saw the brave marines he nurtured being cut down one by one by the dual blades of a vermillion haired girl.

"Wha─?"

The snarly-looking Marine Commander couldn't believe what he was seeing. But the scene remained unchanged no matter how many times he blinked. The aesthetic of the despair inflicted by the saber and short sword, as it reaps away souls reminded him of a name.

"… The strongest sword, Igsem? Are you kidding me, why is that monster on the sea!"

Greg yelled as if he was caught in a nightmare. The marines before him formed a wall, and the red swordsman breached it, and the imperial soldiers charge in from the gap she made and widened it. With someone directing the weak points they should target, the imperials had no hesitation in their movements. With their opponents pushing their initiative right from the start, the Kioka soldiers were put on the back foot and on the verge of being overwhelmed.

"This is bad…"

While Greg was muttering to himself, he noticed muzzles from the enemy ship being pointed at him and leaped off the platform. He wasn't fazed by the bullets flying over his head and yelled at the crow's nest above him:

"Wind gunner! Do something about that monster! Stop her from harassing our vanguards!"

"But… it's tough! I can barely keep up with her movements, and to avoid shooting our own guys by accident— uwah!"

The body of the wind gunner suddenly slumped to the side, then fell over the railings head first. The Marine Commander rushed to where he fell, and saw the head of the dead man being turned in an impossible angle.

"Tefug… Damn it!"

Rage welled up in his heart, and he knocked the deck with the stem of his axe… Since the enemy also has wind gunners, they had to keep

the enemy down with suppressing fire to avoid this tragedy from happening. In other words, he had to deal with the melee battle himself.

"… I have to do work aside from yelling at my men, huh… Just great, what a bummer!"

Greg came up with a countermeasure despite his surging emotions, and yelled at his deputy:

"Get the negotiation flag right now!"

After boarding the ship and defeating the twelfth soldier, Yatori noticed the flag with red and white vertical stripes at the back of the enemy being raised.

"Proposing a negotiation…? That was quick, the battle just started."

She was surprised by this turn of events, and orders to ceasefire came from the "Fierce Tiger" that caught sight of the flag. Yatori ordered her subordinates to keep their distance from the enemy. The two forces retreated to the starboard and port side of the ship respectively, splitting the deck of the "Ravisher" from bow to stern.

"― Hey, it’s a surprise to see that she is a woman."

Shortly after, a large man appeared from the wall formed by the Kioka marines. The sight of Greg’s mouth that was split up to his ears caused a stir within the imperial ranks.

"On closer look, you are really young. How old are you, little Igsem girl?"

"About half your age I guess. But I don’t think age is important in this situation."

Behind her, the commander of the melee unit of the "Fierce Tiger" walked forth. He wasn’t as buff as Greg, but he still had a big built.

He stood in front of Yatori without fearing the terrifying appearance of the Kioka soldier and said:

"I'm Petty Officer Grashina Bisuri of the imperial warship [Fierce Tiger]. I don't have the authority to perform negotiations, but you can think of me as the communication window. State your terms."

"Thanks a lot. I'm Greg Ayuzadori of the Kioka warship [Ravisher]. I have the rank of a Naval Commander, but strictly speaking, I'm not part of the sailing crew. Just think of me as the boss of those marines behind me."

"Understood, Naval Commander Ayuzadori. If I'm not wrong, you are not authorized to negotiate directly either?"

"Not on the matters of navigation, but when we are attacked, I have full authority to make the call. You can just skip all the hassle and negotiate with me right on the spot."

Greg said as he pointed at himself with his thumb. Petty Officer Bisuri accepted that and nod:

"Well then, let's hear your terms. If you wish to surrender, I can guarantee the safety of all your crew."

"Stop kidding around, the battle has just begun— never mind, we are the ones who halt the fighting, so let me make this simple."

Greg swung the axe in his right arm, pointing its tip at the vermillion haired girl:

"I want to beat that monster, let me have a duel with that Igsem."

When he state his demand, the deck of the ship turned rowdy. Petty Officer Bisuri yelled at his subordinates to "keep it down", then turned to Greg with a frown:

"… I can relay that if that is your request. However, my superiors will obviously turn you down. We have nothing to gain from your proposal."

"Don't worry, I will throw in an enticing bargain. If I lose, the [Ravisher] will officially surrender to you. Keeping your men from harm is a good thing for you, right?"

"… And what if you win? You expect us to surrender too?"

"That will be great, but there's no way you will accept that. When that happens, we can just start fighting again. We will battle seriously until one side gives in. That's what both sides are planning to do in the first place, correct?"

"……"

"You have nothing to lose. If you weigh it on a scale, you will find that there is no reason to refuse─ but it's a different matter if you can't trust the Igsem girl who will be key in all this."

He wasn't just taunting Petty Officer Bisuri, but Yatori too. Greg glanced her way, and continued adding fuel to the fire:

"Little girl, if you turn down my challenge, then the title of [strongest] will just be bullshit. Even if you win the battle, the name of Igsem will be soiled forever. No, for this case, I should say it will sink into the bottom of the sea."

He intentionally laughed crudely after saying that. And of course, Yatori wasn't fazed at all. However, it made Petty Officer Bisuri uncomfortable.

"… I will relay your proposal then. First Lieutenant Yatori Shino, is this fine by you?"

"No matter what the decision is, I will follow the given orders."

Petty Officer Bisuri’s doubts were cleared after hearing that reply, and backed away to send out a messenger. Yatori and Greg continued facing each other, and the fearsome Marine Commander continued talking smack:

"— Little girl, do you know that there are sharks in these waters?"

"……"

"They don’t especially like eating people, since there are easier prey for them to hunt. But why do they attack humans— this is just my opinion— but they are probably doing so out of curiosity? They had never seen creatures struggling in the waters, which pique their interest and draw them in. Humans will touch with their hands to satisfy their curiosity, but those guys don’t have hands. So they will take a nibble. For them, this is the safest way."

Greg said as he looked at the raging waves. The imperial soldiers influenced by him also looked to the waters, imagined there to be countless sharks in them, and gulped tensely.

"They are just curious, but the results are horrifying. The suffering will continue until their curiosity is satisfied. Arms, legs, stomach— not just once or twice, they will keep chewing those parts happily. Unlike blades that aren’t maintained well, their teeth are sharp and gets replaced frequently, making them just like you. They can tear through skin and flesh easily, and will even break through bones and sinew. When that happens, the waters will be dyed red."

The faces of the imperial soldiers imagining that cruel scene all twisted in fear. The tale affected them greatly, but his crucial opponent remained unmoved. Greg kept harassing her:

"Little girl… did you have fun running around the deck? You better watch your steps and don’t fall overboard. Now think about the possible consequences of what you just did."

Greg smirked as he observed his opponent’s reaction. Her facial expression remained unchanged─ he should have left an impression after talking for so long. If it dulls her footing just by a little, then it would be worth it.

"Is that so? Thank you for your valuable information─ Can I say something too, Naval Commander Ayuzadori?"

The vermillion haired girl spoke a while later. Greg who thought she would remain quiet til the end was surprised, but he didn’t let it show on his face and nodded:

"Yes, that’s fine. If there’s something more terrifying than sharks, I will want to know."

His grin that reached up to his ear scowled in a taunt. Yatori dropped her gaze slightly below his abnormal face and said without any reservation:

"Your shoulder is trembling."

Those words were enough to freeze the air. Greg who made countless subordinates tremble in fear turned pale with his snarling grin frozen in place.

─What are you doing!? Laugh it off right away!

His rational side screamed, but that was impossible for him to pull off. Because his instinct knew the truth.

─She saw through me.

The moment he realized that, Greg gave in. There was no point in all that talk, he was the one digging his own grave.

The one who was terrified in the face of something more fearsome than a shark was himself!

"The Captain permits it! We accept your proposal, and agree to a duel right here!"

Petty Officer Bisuri shouted as he rushed back to Yatori's side. When he heard that, Greg threw the axe in his right hand onto the deck:

"… Bring me my full set of gear!"

His subordinates rushed down the stairs on his orders, and into the ship. Shortly after, the three of them carried something out together. It was a tower shield and spear that was taller than them, just like the axe. The spear was larger than the standard size, while the tower shield was the standard shield used to protect officers, with steel plates nailed onto it.

It was obviously too heavy for normal marines, but for the tall and burly Greg, it was just right. With the spear in his right hand and shield in his left hand, he returned to the center of the human wall. The red haired swordsman also walked forth in response to him.

"Aren't you using that incredible looking axe? Is this the weapons you use when you are serious?"

"If you are a foe that will be intimidated by appearance, I will gladly use that… But it's a damn shame that it won't work this time."

Greg adopted a posture that covered most of his body behind the huge rectangular shield, and eyed his opponent cautiously. The square hole at the top of the shield ensured his field of vision while he gripped the spear in his right hand tightly:

"I hate to admit it, but I'm a fool for trying make a monster fear me— I won't waste my efforts on futile endeavours, and defeat you with the appropriate means."

"Is that so, I look forward to that."

Yatori answered curtly and drew her swords and took a stance. To prevent anyone from interfering with the duel, the forces of both sides kept each other in check. At this moment, a voice came from behind Yatori:

"First Lieutenant Yatori Shino, this might not be the best time to say that, but I'm your fan."

Petty Officer Bisuri who was standing in front of the marines confessed with a serious face. Yatori who was facing the enemy didn't turn back, but he continued speaking anyway:

"I hope to continue doing so… That's all I want to say."

His words were clumsy and plain, and too reserved for a pep talk. But the red headed swordsman acknowledged the feelings in these words, and nodded without hesitation:

"Don't worry."

With this short answer, Greg thrust his spear at her in place of a greeting. Yatori parried this blow with her saber, and the clash of metal signalled the start of the duel.

The cloudy sky entered his field of vision, making Matthew realize that he was lying on his back.

"… Ughh…"

He moved a little, and jolts of pain passed through his entire body. He wasn't bleeding, but his body was protesting painfully after getting slammed onto the deck. The cannon shot landed near him this time.

"D-Damage report…"

Matthew finally propped up his upper body and looked around him. It was worse than he thought, all the crew gathered at the quarterdeck fell down, and there was a crater in the deck where the ship was hit.

The unlucky sailors standing near there were wounded gravely, with some of the limbs on the verge of falling off.

"Damn it… this is bad…"

Matthew listened to the choir of screams and could see that the situation was worse than it appears. The weather that was too terrible for sailing; Naval Commander Higorum and Naval Commander Kutsuchi went down; and now, they were hit for the third time— the battle was far from over, but the crew's spirit had almost been broken by this unfortunate series of events.

Matthew understood that because he felt the same too. He didn't suffer any injury that kept him from standing up, but his arms were weak and knees were heavy.

This is it

— he tightly shut his mouth to say such disheartening words, and search desperately for someone he could rely on:

"Po… Naval Lieutenant Polminue, hurry up and take over command, don't keep quiet! If you don't restore order now, it will be too late—"

The voice of the pudgy youth waned off at this point:

"…Naval Lieutenant… Polminue…?"

He called out with a trembling voice. However, he couldn't see Pommy in front of him. Before they were hit, Pommy was standing near the railings at the starboard, but only streaks of fresh blood was left there.

"… It can't be… Hey, this is a lie, right…?"

Matthew dragged his weak legs as he crawled to the blood stain. At the same time, he searched around frantically, but couldn't find any signs of Pommy anywhere. That means—

"Ughh…!"

He arrived at the worst conclusion. Matthew forced himself to shelf away that thought and continue crawling:

"Answer me! Naval Lieutenant Polminue! Please tell me you are alright…!"

Matthew reached the blood stain without getting an answer to his pleas. He had checked all the places his eyes could see, and going by the merciless process of elimination, Matthew had to face the possibility that he feared the most. He looked fearfully beyond the railings— at the rolling waves of the grey sea that threatens to devour everything.

"Pommy…!"

Matthew grabbed onto the railings and search below. He knew that doing so was meaningless, the sea was too violent for anyone to surface in it. The cold reality pierced his heart, and Matthew's hands gripping the railings tightly suddenly loosened.

"D-Damn it…!"

After stubbornly ignoring his disheartening thoughts, Matthew couldn't stop himself from groaning anymore— he was just starting to believe in her! He had just put his faith in her!

"… Damn it…"

A sense of powerlessness struck Matthew, and he remained kneeling on the deck motionlessly. His body felt as heavy as lead, and he didn't have the strength to even move a finger.

Am I going to die here

— this thought that flashed across his mind countless times finally felt real this time and encroach into his senses.

He didn’t have the means or will to defy death, and was already wallowing in despair…

And suddenly— he heard singing.

"— The sun rises~ The seagulls sing—"

The crew members raised their head. Numerous gaze searched up high for the figure of the singer.

"—the tide ebbs and rises~ the waves wash ashore. Now is the time to sail—"

The next moment, they saw a mirage on the beam of the main mast. The tall figure stood confidently despite the unstable footings. He wore a tricorne on his head and had a scar on his right cheek.

With a bold smile and the expression of an adventurer that didn’t know fear mesmerized everyone and took their breath away. He was the key stone of the Pirate Navy, an undying legend passed down from sailors to sailors.

"—Board the ship~ Undo the ropes~ Sail forth and never turn back—"

This mass hallucination only lasted for a short time. The crew snapped back to reality, and realized that the person standing there wasn’t so tall that they need to look up at her face, and wasn’t wearing a tricorne. It was just a young girl with reddish blonde hair they were all familiar with. Her left arm was still bleeding, staining the sail below her red.

But she was just like the legend, bearing the same will and singing the same song.

"Boat song of the Windmill Palm…"

Matthew muttered as he looked up at that figure with the rest of the crew.

— According to legends, this great sailor will sing this song to encourage his friends when they sailed in a storm, was pursued by enemy and when their food was running out.

"—Head to uncharted land~ Sail to the unknown seas~ With limitless dreams in our arms~ and our minds soaring forth—"

He encountered numerous hardship brought about by men and nature during his journey through the seven seas. If they didn't have this song that symbolized their determinations during their journey, they wouldn't have made it. Everyone who sent them off thought the same thing— None would survive the journey.

"—The assault of a storm~ the torment of a drought~ Will death claim me tomorrow?

Not today, I say~ If I was to slumber forever~ It will be under the waters at the far end of the world—"

But after leaving on their journey of no return, they came back. The ship that sailed westwards went around the world, and returned back to their home country from the east. They didn't reach the far end of the world, as the destination they seek was actually connected to their starting point. The world was actually a closed loop.

After leaving his homeland for so long, he said with a wry smile— we didn't find the land of our dreams, and failed to leave this place behind.

"—Raise the sails~ Catch the wind~ The goal of our dream marks the end of our journey—"

After that man left the world, his spirit remained at sea. Many sailors held on the compass and the will to sail towards the far ends of the world.

"—Without any fear~ With no regards to life~ I just want to see~ what lies beyond this ocean—"

Spurred by this song, the crew lying on the quarterdeck of the "Spearfish" pulled themselves up. They had to do so, because they were the proud Katjvarna Pirate Navy, the ones who inherited the will of the great Captain Garciev!

"… You awake now!? Good, then get a move on, lads! Prepare for tacking!"

Polminue･Jurgus yelled from the beam in her capacity as the Captain. This order was like a light that restored morale and order on the dispirited "Spearfish".

"… Ha… Haha…! This girl…!"

Feeling blood circulation returned to his limbs, Matthew stood up again. Pommy who confirmed that the morale had returned to the ship climbed down the rope ladder swiftly, then said energetically to the youth waiting for her on the quarterdeck:

"Matthew, sorry for the wait! As per your nomination, I will take over command!"

"Ohh… Right…!"

As her tone was different from before, Matthew felt awkward. He wondered if she had reverted to her ways on the "Tyrannosaur" for a moment, but dismiss that thought immediately, sensing that it was different. Her attitude wasn't tense for the sake of protecting her ego. Her face wasn't irate, nor was her voice unnecessarily oppressive. Before him was a female pirate who was just being herself.

"You two there! Send the wounded into the cabin! Give priority to Naval Commander Kutsuchi and the serious casualties!"

Pommy gave instructions swiftly as she walked through the quarterdeck. She quickly locked eyes with Naval Lieutenant Paume and Naval Lieutenant Yorin who was standing up near the helm. The

two of them were still caught off guard by the sudden turn of events, and Pommy lowered her head without hesitation and pleaded:

"Naval Lieutenant Paume, Naval Lieutenant Yorin… Please lend me your strength. Your aid is necessary to overcome this desperate times."

"Huh… Ah…?""No… that's…"

"Paume, please continue to take the helm, Yorin, can you supervise the sails─ since your training days, you are good at seeing the limits of the sails deployment, correct? With how the wind currently is, I will be counting on you."

Pommy patted the shoulder of the woman she had a bad history with, and showed a big smile. Yorin's hostility probably got washed away by that smile, and she ran to her assigned station after a moment's hesitation.

"… Very good. I will leave the rest to you, Naval Lieutenant Polminue."

Naval Commander Kutsuchi said these parting words as he was taken away on a stretcher Pommy glance his way and nodded firmly:

"I will do the very best I can─ Paume, hard to port!"

In response to that order, the young officer turned the wheel to the left on reflex. With that tacking maneuver, the Blast cannon ship they were chasing disappeared to their right. Matthew who was grabbing the railings to counter the slanting of the ship asked:

"Hard to port…? If you want to give up the chase and escape downwind, you should be turning right instead, correct? What are you planning to do, Pommy!"

"We are switching targets! We will let our original target go, and pursue the ship that shot at us! From my observations, that is the enemy flag ship!"

The female pirate concluded confidently. During her look out duties all this while, Pommy had been analyzing the enemy. The movement of the vessels, the order they raise their signal flags and send their light messages─ from what she had seen, she determined that one of the eight Blast cannon ships was the enemy flag ship.

"If that’s the flag ship, then the fleet admiral will be there! If we take down that ship, we might end this battle!"

"… I see, got it!"

Matthew didn’t ask for further explanations, and decided to follow her directions. Since he had chosen Pommy to lead them, he won’t interfere with her judgement on navigation. In order to do his best under this circumstances, the pudgy youth started to analyse the situation.

"─They are coming after us? They already took three hits, how tenacious…!"

On the quarterdeck of the Kioka flag ship "White Wing", Elulufay noticed the "Spearfish" had veered off course widely. That ship was less than a hundred metres away from them. They got so close to avoid hitting their own ship by accident.

"Great Mother! Our allied ship had escaped safely! Let’s flee upwind too!"

"… I want to do that too. But I said many times already, the enemy has the advantage if we sail upwind. With them so close to us, we will be caught even if we attempt to flee."

Forced to make an immediate decision, Elulufay increased her thinking speed─ and considered the relative position with the enemy, the equipment, ship and crew damage on both sides. After analyzing these conditions, she reached a conclusion:

"… I have decided, we won’t run. We will sail downwind to engage the enemy."

When he heard the Great Mother’s decision, her deputy felt a chill down his spine:

"A-Are you planning to engage them in a one on one duel?"

"That’s right. We are a Blast cannon ship, our opponent is just a regular vessel— there’s no reason that we will lose. Luckily, Greg and the others blocked the other enemy ships, so the conditions for our victory are all ready."

"That might be so… but if anything…!"

"I already said, there won’t be any accidents if I am in command— ready the cannons!"

"They are coming…!"

Pommy started shaking when she saw the enemy ship turning downwind. It was about 70 percent fear and thirty percent excitement. In any case, there was no doubts that the enemy wished to fight.

Excluding the first time when she suffered a crushing defeat before even knowing what hit her, this was also Pommy’s first one on one encounter against a Blast cannon ship. However, she now has the knowledge and will to do battle with it.

— Listen up, Pol-chan. There is only one goal when fighting a Blast cannon ship, that is evade the cannon fire and close in at the same time.

That was the advice given by the dark haired youth when she was on the "Yellow Dragon". Pommy had been thinking about everything he said all this while, and confirming it with her own experience as a sailor.

― The Blast cannons are fixed to the side of the ship, so the enemy will try to show their flanks towards us. In this situation, the head on engagement and parallel engagement that are normally used to attack will give them an overwhelming advantage, do you understand?

Two ships sailing parallel to each other would be the best opportunity for the enemy to fire. With that mind, it was possible to deduce with some margin of accuracy when the enemy will fire.

"… Now! Hard to starboard!""Aye aye!"

The enemy vessel could be seen sailing across the front of the ship about 40m away. Pommy estimated the moment when the enemy would be perpendicular to the "Spearfish", and gave the instruction to perform tacking. The movement of the rudder and the mast beam turned the ship the other way― the next instant, the water on their port side exploded.

"Good, we dodged it…!"

Pommy clenched her fist and savored the feelings of success. Because her guess was spot on, they managed to evade the bombardment and close the distance significantly at the same time― the next question was, what would their opponent do now?

Since they just fired, the cannons on their starboard would need some time to reload, which would be two and a half minutes at best. Would the enemy vessel maintain its course during this time? Sail upwind? Or maybe move further downwind― Pommy watched the enemy vessel's movement closely.

"… It's maintaining course, alright then!"

If they both keep their speed and bearing, then the "Spearfish" will soon close in to the enemy's diagonal rear. It was obvious that their opponent would want to avoid that, and would probably pull off some trick right before they are caught. They might turn the sails parallel to the wind so they would slow down and sail beside the "Spearfish". Or

they could set course downwind while they still had a lead, and shoot at the "Spearfish" in the midst of their turn.

"If it is the former, we need to tack to the opposite side… And overtake them to seize the upwind position. If it is the latter, we will match the enemy's turn and ram into their flank. We might get shot at if the timing is off, but our ship's ram will definitely smash into them…"

They could hold on to the advantage no matter which option was taken. But Pommy realized how naive she was in the next moment.

"— What…!"

The Kioka ship flung its stern hard before her eyes. By only making the front mast catch the wind and letting the wind through their other sails, the ship's bow was suddenly turned downwind. The ship's stern was spun clockwise by the momentum— Pommy never expected the enemy ship to pull off a 180 turn.

The female pirate felt a chill down her back at this instance. A 180 turn meant that the flank facing the "Spearfish" had swapped. So instead of the starboard side that was still reloading, this was the port side that was ready to fire…!

"Hard to starboard!"

Her judgement came at the nick of time. The "Spearfish" escaped successfully downwind, with the cannon fire brushing dangerously close to the ship's stern. And the chilling thing was, this volley was aimed below their waterline, and would deal a mortal blow to the ship if the order was given a few seconds slower.

"What happened just now… Did they lead us on intentionally…?"

The descendent of Jurgus looked at the Kioka ship gradually moving away from their port side with fearful eyes.

"― To turn downwind at that instance, what impressive judgement."

When she saw the cannon fire missed the enemy, Elulufay gave due props to the opposing commander. She thought that trap had an eighty percent chance of taking out the enemy, and was impressed by her foe who beat that expectation.

"Did I underestimate the skills of the imperial navy? Or does the credit lies with the observations of the unknown enemy strategist… No, it should be both. Without both conditions, the battle won't devolve into a close fight like this."

Elulufay warned herself, she wasn't taking the enemy lightly anymore.

"But even so, our overwhelming advantage remains unchanged. Our first exchange just now yielded a result of 6 to 4, to our advantage. If we continue this fight, this difference will accumulate. It will be just a matter of time before we win."

The distance closed in by the enemy were lost because the opposing ship turned downwind to avoid the bombardment. If they repeat the same battle conditions, Elulufay was confident that she wouldn't lose.

"I acknowledge your skills and wits― however, you don't have the blessings of the wind!"

Pii… her pet bird's caw came from the sky. She heard the message sent by her pet, and issued the next order to the crew.

"―Hah!"

On the Kioka warship "Ravisher", Greg's thrust missed for the upteenth time, and a red figure attempt to flank from the left or right after each failed attempt. But he kept her at bay with the stubborn defence of the tower shield in his left hand.

"Amazing, as expected of the commander!""You have the advantage, keep it up!""Avenge our comrades!"

The gruesome looking Marine Commander cursed as he listened to the cheers behind him—

all of you are just shooting your mouth off irresponsibly, you have any idea what kind of monster your boss is fighting against?

"Wooahh!"

The thrust from the saber brushed dangerous close to his palm from the opening that showed during Greg's blow. Greg felt frustrated as he could feel his opponent's attack was getting bolder and more precise after each exchange.

"You monster…!"

The cramp space on the ship and the unsteady footings due to bad weather was the norm for Greg who was a marine. He used the combo of spear and tower shield in order to further restrict the enemy's movement in this cramp space, a tactic he came up with after years of study. All these conditions would maximize the advantage Greg would have— and since he was still standing here, it had proven effective.

"Watch it, girl!"

Yatori who pulled away had her back to the anchoring platform. Seeing the chance he had been waiting for, Greg charged forth with his shield raised. On his opponent's right was a pile of rope, and she could only jump to the left to avoid being knocked overboard. Greg realized this and cut off her only escape route, and thrust his spear forth— However, his two prong attacked missed.

"—Ughh!"

The next instant, a blade slashed down from above. With her left hand on top of the tower shield acting as the pivot, the vermillion

haired girl jumped over Greg’s large body with a somersault, and slashed with her saber at the same time. The only thing Greg could do was to pull his hand away from the shield on reflex and roll away.

"Tch…!"

After barely escaping death, he found Yatori pointing her blade at him. Even with one hand holding a weapon, she still managed to land on her feet after a somersault. In contrast with Greg who was sweating profusely, the girl’s breathing wasn’t even ragged.

—She’s not human.

His lips that were split to his ear twitched a little. The unsupported tower shield fell into the sea from the anchoring platform, but now wasn’t the time to care about that. Greg grabbed his spear with both hands and backed away in cold sweat. He tried to turn his pouch towards his opponent nonchalantly—

"I have seen that move before."

Yatori saw through his move and immediately dash forth. After evading Greg’s instinctive thrust by millimeters, she cut off the pouch from his waist from a low stance.

"What…!"

The pouch made a sound when it fell onto the deck, and Greg’s Wind Sprite partner rolled out of it. When she saw the mini barrel of a wind gun attached to the belly of the wind Sprite, Yatori sighed:

"That must take a lot of effort to prepare… But your movements to aim it is too obvious. And your attention is on your hidden trump card, so your spear moved stiffly."

"… Ugh!"

"Basically, using range weapon in a duel is a violation of the rules. I'm upset by this development— I won't demand the bout to end here, but I won't show any mercy now."

Yatori declared as an intimidating pressure was emitted from the tip of her blade. She was implying that she had been holding back and fighting without any intention to kill. Greg felt the urge from the bottom of his guts to laugh dryly.

—That's right, she never planned to kill me right from the start.

Greg noticed that too. For the vermillion haired girl whose skills overwhelmed his, instead of killing him, it was better for her to defeat and make him yield. The soldiers could still fight after losing their commander, but they would have no choice but to surrender if ordered by their superiors. Yatori never believed that Greg would honor his promise to surrender the entire ship if he lost.

Since she was more powerful than her opponent, she didn't need to kill him, and opts to make him yield instead. This was the style of the strongest. However, Greg disagree with that— from another perspective, this pride was no different from arrogance.

"Damn it!"

He kept her at bay with his spear and slowly back away. He retreated slowly to the ship's bow along the side of the ship as he schemed quietly… for the best and only chance to take out this monster.

— From the very start, my thinking is the opposite of you.

Greg stopped half way along the way. To his opponent, he must look as if he had been forced into a corner and resolved himself. His trembling hands weren't an act either, however…

— The only thing I'm after is to kill you, even if I have to break all the dueling rules!

At this crucial moment, Greg wasn't bracing himself for death, but resolving himself to kill.

"Fall!"

Greg stamped the deck as he roared. The roar was a signal spurring the three murderous intent above him.

Three of Greg's crossbowmen were hidden on the beam of the foremast, in the blindspot of the imperial soldiers watching the duel. As the duel started at the stern of the ship, so they weren't aware of an ambush at the ship's bow. They took position before the negotiation flag was raised, which was Greg's real scheme.

― We did it!

The Marine Commander was certain of it. His men won't miss at this distance, and their bolts would definitely pierce the enemy. He would attack with his spear while she was stunned, and he thought up all sorts of simulations leading to his victory.

"― Phew…"

Before Greg's eyes, Yatori drew her sheathed short sword with her left hand.

It's too late for that now

― Greg mocked her in his mind before witnessing a nightmare at the next moment.

Yatori stepped forth with the blades in her hands cutting the air in a whirlpool pattern. The three bolts aimed at her flew into the path of her swords as if they were drawn in― and were deflected by the oval path of the blades, falling harmlessly onto the deck.

"― How can this be―"

She cut down the three bolts just by drawing an oval in the air. The astonishing technique was so beautiful and brought about so much despair that Greg couldn't help being mesmerized. He then thought about the rumours he dismissed as bullshit in the past. The rumours amongst the men that the Igsem could deflect arrows.

"You are incorrigible, marine!"

Yatori charged forth with that, dodging the spear that was slowed because of shock, coming right up to Greg's arms. The slash from below cut his face a little, and while her foe was still faltering from the sharp pain, Yatori smashed her hilt into Greg's jaw.

"Uwah…!"

The sound of his jaw cracking reverberated on the ship, and Greg fell feebly onto his knees because of concussion. The fiery haired swordsman pointed her blade at his eyes, and asked sternly:

"This is your last chance— do you choose to yield, or to die?"

Her bright red eyes signalled her intentions clearly. Depending on his answer, she might lop his head off on the spot. Greg understood clearly that he was lucky to be alive, and that his luck has run out.

To the east, the battle was still raging on. The "Spearfish" and "White Wing" continued their to and fro engagement. Elulufay used her impressive seamanship and Blast cannons to ward off Pommy and the others that were trying to dodge the cannon fire and close in. With neither side able to pull off a decisive strike, the one on one battle was starting to heat up.

"To think the Kioka has such a capable sailor…!"

Pommy gave props to the enemy commander. The weather continued to deteriorate, and it was a miracle that they were sailing at all. Controlling the ship in such whimsical winds was as dangerous as walking on thin wire. The enemy vessel was able to pull off stunts

from time to time in such terrible conditions, as if they had the blessings of the wind deity.

"We can't lose! I can see and hear the wind too…!"

Pommy raised the keenness of her five senses to the limit, and read the turbulent wind with her instincts— the ability to directly understand her environment was undoubtedly an innate talent of a Jurgus descendent.

"Incoming fire! Perform tacking!"

The moment they changed course, splashes erupted at the position they were at moments earlier. Pommy had gotten used to dodging the first barrage while they were still some distance away, but the problem was with the second volley as they close in. Since the enemy was determined to keep their opponent away, it was incredibly difficult to close in and avoid a critical hit at the same time.

"Ugh—"

Pommy shook her head to clear a sudden sense of vertigo. Her left arm that was wounded during the third strike was still bleeding, and posed a serious problem.

"I need to pull myself together! Tis but a scratch…!"

First aid was given and bandages was used to dressed her wounds, but it couldn't stem the bleeding completely. A few stitches and proper rest was needed to .

A pudgy youth stood some distance away and looked at Pommy who was hiding her discomfort with her strong will:

"She doesn't look good… she won't last long."

Compared to earlier, Pommy's face look paler and worried Matthew more. Matthew scratched his head violently, realizing that they would lose a drawn out battle.

"We can’t wait the enemy to commit an error, we have to take the initiative to create an opening."

Matthew already tried to snipe them with the Anti Material Air Rifle. But the enemy had raised their guard, making it hard for him to target the helm, and the wayward wind reduced the precision of the shot. It might be possible for Torway, but the sniper on this ship couldn’t pull it off.

"Damn it! Isn’t there any other target! Anything within our range…?"

Matthew glared at the enemy ship through his telescope to search for a way out. At this moment, his right eye noticed something in the sky.

"What’s that… a bird…? No, a hawk…?"

The white winged bird glided freely in the raging storm. Wild birds wouldn’t take flight in such precarious weather, so that Kioka ship was controlling that bird in some way? Matthew still felt baffled. Why would they do that?

"Wait, a hawk…? Speaking of which, I heard somewhere…"

The drawers in the slightly plump youth’s memory started to creak. He rummaged through his memory from the slight sense of disjointment, and found the relevant data in an unexpected place.

The chronicles of Captain Garciev’s eastern sea adventures that was read to him when he was young. The fourth chapter mentioned that he encountered a foreign tribe on the shore of the eastern continent known as the "Falconer Tribe". Instead of Sprites, they had birds as partners, and learned the wisdom of the sky and the wind from them for their entire lives.

"… Could that be it?"

The godlike sailing skills matched the information from his memories. Since Kioka claims to be a multi cultural nation, so this was very plausible. Matthew was convinced that there was merit in this line of thinking.

"It’s worth a try…!"

After making that conclusion, the youth rushed back to the ship’s bow where his men were waiting— in anycase, he had to try everything that he could!

"All gunners switch targets! Aim for that bird circling above the enemy ship!"

This order with unclear intentions confused the windgunners. But seeing that their commander was serious, they push aside their doubts and execute the order. Twenty odd muzzles pointed towards that bird, and the triggers were squeezed simultaneously.

"They are tight on our tail…! They might be our enemy, but I can respect their persistence!"

Elulufay wasn’t fazed by the rain hitting her cheeks and continued directing the flag ship "White Wing". She couldn’t catch the enemy with the cannons, but she refused to give up the advantage of her upwind position.

"I want to continue the race, but I can’t waste more time here. We will decide this in the next exchange— I’m counting on you, Misai!"

Elulufay raised her gaze to her pet bird above and issued her orders to the crew. The "White Wing" changed course, passing by the bow of the enemy’s ship. She plans to win the jostling for position this time and deal a critical blow to the enemy.

Both ships had made plenty of bold maneuvers, but their relative position of being upwind and downwind remained unchanged. On the

whole, the "Spearfish" was operating under harsher conditions. This difference was clearly showing with its slower speed.

"The enemy isn’t as nimble as before. We can just see what they will do and then react to it."

Elulufay was convinced that she was just one step away from checkmating her opponent. The movements of both ships were predictable because their speed was about the same. But they were now significantly faster, so the enemy had lost the means to overturn their disadvantage.

"Prepare the cannons on both flanks! We will finish them off right here!"

They were less than 50m from the enemy. Right before it sails into the firing line of the "White Wing", the "Spearfish" turned again. Unfortunately, their movement was too slow and they failed evading on time. The "White Wing" had plenty of leeway to turn the rudder to catch their prey.

"Oh no, danger! Two notches to starboard!"

Pii─ She heard the cry of her pet bird. Elulufay knew that the wind would be changing from that, and ordered the helmsman to turn the rudder. Right after the turn, a violent horizontal wind pass through between the sails.

This movement was only possible because Elulufay Tenerexilla was of the "Falconer Tribe". Misai that was circling above the ship could read the changes in the wind accurately and inform its owner. Only Elulufay could differentiate the minute difference of its cries.

No matter how terrible the weather was, the "Great Mother of White Wings" wouldn’t be fazed since she possessed such an ability, and could navigate calmly. A long time ago, the man who took her in suggested that she use the skills of the falconer in the military.

"Sail parallel to the enemy ship, with our starboard facing them! The gunports that have the enemy in their sights, open fire─"

The moment she was issuing this order, her pet bird above her cawed. It wasn't a signal of the changing wind, but the urgency and pitch made it clear that it was a cry of distress.

"─Misai?"

She looked up on reflex, and saw with her own eyes─ a white figure tumbling in the wind as it fell. Her partner since childhood who had been through thick and thin with her was being pulled towards the ocean without any resistance.

"Ugh…!"

As the sail blocked her view midway, Elulufay couldn't tell if her pet bird really fell into the ocean. She wanted to rush to the bow of the ship from her current position at the stern, but her adjutant stopped her:

"Please wait, Great Mother! There's enemy movement…!"

That pulled Elulufay back to reality and she looked to the portside. The enemy ship that was almost in line with them had fallen behind in pace. While she was looking away, they used their sails to forcefully slow their advance.

"Oh no, we lost our chance to fire…!"

The Great Mother's face turned tense when she realized that she missed her opportunity. The enemy forcefully slowing down was just a desperate measure, and if Elulufay dealt with it calmly, she could inflict great damage on them. However, her attention was drawn away at the crucial moment, and she let that chance slip.

"What should we do, Great Mother? Shall we return upwind and try again?"

Even if her adjutant asked her that, Elulufay couldn’t answer immediately like before. She acted without hesitation because she had Misai’s help. But after losing its guidance, sailing from this moment forth would be riddled with risks. Elulufay felt her back drenched in uncomfortable cold sweat.

"Great Mother, your orders please!"

"… Ugh!"

However, she didn’t have time to worry about that now. After a brief moment of thought, Elulufay gave her instructions, feeling like her wings had been clipped mid flight:

"Tacking… No, wearing! Turn the rudder right!"

Fearing that she might misread the wind, the Great Mother became cautious in her judgement. Her bold decisions earlier was like a dream, and this instruction was very passive─ her shortcomings as a sailor under her thick feather coat was being exposed.

"Retract the sails on all masts to the minimum! It’s too dangerous to stay like this─"

The whimsical god of wind didn’t forgive Elulufay’s mistake.

"─What!?"

In that moment when the dark skies was illuminated by lightning, the "White Wing" was assailed by strong winds, as if divine retribution had struck them. The ropes snapped without even getting a chance to creak, and two of the sails on the front mast that took the brunt of the wind were torn to pieces and scattered into the air. The destruction happened instantly, and didn’t permit the crews to even protest.

"Uwahhhh!""Damn it! The main sail and top sail of the front mast are damaged!"

Their admiral listened to the choir of screams all over the ship. Just a whimsical gust of wind dealt incredible damage to the "White Wing". Before Elulufay could even take that all in, a bigger threat was approaching from the port side.

"G-Great Mother! Look at that…! A tidal wave!"

She turned and found a wall of seawater taller than her ship approaching slowly. Elulufay was shocked by this menacing threat—it's reaching soon!

"H-Hard to portside! Aim the bow of the ship at the tidal wave!"

If they didn't do anything, the ship would be capsized by the wave. They had to minimize the surface of the ship facing the wave to survive this. No one raised any objections. The helmsman forcefully turned the rudder that had grown stiff because of the drop in speed.

"We have to make it in time...!"

As Elulufay prayed with bated breath, she saw something ludicrous from the corner of her eye.

"—What the...!"

She could only brace herself for impact. The enemy didn't falter before the threat that forced the Great Mother to turn on the defensive. The "Spearfish" cut into the slope from an angle, and surfed on top of the wave!

"Charge!!"

On the ship that was tilted to the limits, the roar of the female pirate echoed through the ship. The crew was moving with a spirit that rivalled hers, but Matthew and his men couldn't keep up. It took everything they had just to grab the ropes and railings to bear with the fear.

"T-This is insane…!"

It was only natural for his voice to a pitch higher. The "Spearfish" that rode on top of the wave was slanting beyond comprehension, with the sea that was supposed to be under them appearing at their side. If they tilt a little more, they will flip over and ground into bits like seaweed and foam. This reckless adventure was at its climax.

"We won’t lose to them!"

In contrast to her face that was turning green, Pommy’s eyes were sparkling. A madness was driving her, and it had spread to all the crew on this ship. Their eyes clearly showed that they had been driven mad by fanaticism, and all showed the same determination—

there is nothing to fear, I have already thrown my life into the sea!

"Ram the enemy! Arghh!"

The ship standing in their course was very near. The enemy vessel was attempting to brace against the huge wave by turning its bow towards it, and spotted the unhinged actions of the "Spearfish surfing on top of the wave. They started firing immediately, blowing off a protruding beam of the foremast, but that didn’t stop the ship!

The sound of heavy wood clashing erupted. The impact announced the end of the suicidal attack reverberated through the "Spearfish". The ship’s ram was embedded deep into the flank of the enemy ship, and a moment later, the wave crashed down on them. The rudder turned the bow of the ship to the wave at the very last moment, stopping the ship from flipping over— and the two warships were connected through the bow of the "Spearfish".

"We caught her…!"

The moment she confirmed that, the tension within Pommy was finally liberated, and her knees buckled. She had kept her consciousness which was fading from anemia with her force of will. As she blacked out, her limbs couldn’t support her body anymore and she collapsed onto the deck.

"Naval Lieutenant Polminue……!""Send her into the cabin quickly! Medic─!"

The medic immediately rushed out from the stairs. As they lift Pommy on a stretcher, the most she could manage was to shift her gaze to the bow of the ship:

"I leave the rest… to you…"

She could barely eke out a voice, but Pommy felt the youth at the front deck three masts away was nodding.

When Pommy fell down at the quarterdeck, the youth at the other end of the ship was getting up. Before him was the enemy ship connected at the deck. The last remnants of calmness in his mind restrain his anxiousness to charge in right away with his men.

"… Can we win? If we have an all out fight…"

He couldn't ignore the worry in his heart and looked behind him. The marines that mustered at the front deck was by no means enough. That was only natural as many of them were wounded by the multiple bombardments, and many more were exhausted by the reckless sailing earlier.

"A-Are we going in… Second Lieutenant… Bleghh…""G-Get up, guys…""… Bleahh…"

Most of Matthew's men were in a sorry state. Just vomiting was fine, there were others who couldn't even stand because of seasickness. Matthew was holding back his nausea with his willpower too, and understood that he was in no condition to fight a melee battle.

"… The enemy can't be worse off than us. They weren't hit by cannon fire, and can easily draw on their reserves… Damn it, what should we do!?"

The more he thought about it, the more disadvantageous this fight seemed to be, which made Matthew hug his head in frustration. The

enemy had not recovered from the shock yet, but once they find out that our side wasn't attacking, they would launch a counter offensive. They would seize the initiative and momentum and overrun the "Spearfish".

"That might be so… but what other choice do we have!? The enemy is right before us, but we don't have the numbers, this is hopeless…!"

Matthew's mind was forced into a corner, and he felt he was going insane. At this moment, he heard a voice pop out from the drawers of his memories:

—"A relaxed war" is the "correct way to wage war"!

"—Ah…"

At this moment, his stiff mind loosened to an incredible degree.

"… Is that so? I shouldn't be restrained like this."

Matthew muttered to himself, and widened his narrow view— the goal wasn't to win a melee battle. That was just a tactical goal, a means to achieve "victory". Since this method wouldn't work, he could just find another way.

They had to win this battle, but they needed to avoid fighting further. What would a commander do to achieve these goals? When Matthew thought about that, the answer sprung right into his mind.

"… Get me the negotiation flag, now!"

The pudgy youth ordered with a strong tone, and his deputy took out a folded flag from his bag and opened it. Another soldier nearby went to get a pole to hoist the flag.

Matthew looked at their preparations from the corner of his eyes, and gave his orders to all the soldiers at the front deck.

"Everyone who can still stand get your uniform and posture in order and follow me! ─ to the enemy ship!"

On the Kioka flag ship "White Wing" that was being attacked, Elulufay was desperately rallying her troops who were on the verge of falling into disarray. They had just gotten ready for the imminent enemy boarding attack, which they expect to happen immediately.

"Listen up, lads! The enemy will throw everything they have at us, but we can’t let them get on our ship!"

On the Great Mother’s orders, the gunners that formed a line and aimed their muzzles at the enemy, ready to decimate their foes when they show up. After they made that decision and readied themselves, something unexpected appeared in their field of vision. A flag with vertical red and white stripes hoisted high on a pole.

"Negotiation flag…? Hold your fire! Stand by with your weapons at the ready!"

Great Mother was suspicious of the enemy’s intent, but still decided to see what they had up their sleeves. She instructed her deputy to raise the flag with red and white horizontal stripes that meant "accept negotiations", and yelled at the enemy vessel:

"We accept your request to negotiate! You may board our ship with a small number of men!"

After hearing that, the imperial soldiers finally came over from the "Spearfish". Their uniform wasn’t that of the navy, but the army. Their commander was a youth who seemed to be in his teens, which surprised Elulufay.

"Erm… Well… I’m the imperial army… No! I-I’m a crew of the imperial warship [Spearfish], Second Lieutenant Matthew Tetzirich! I wish to negotiate with your commander as a representative of the [Spearfish]."

Even the Great Mother felt surprised by his pale face and stuttering demeanour.

"… I'm the representative of the Kioka warship [White Wings], Elulufay Tenerexilla. I accept your request to negotiate. But let me clarify this first, why is an army Second Lieutenant representing your ship?"

"In the battle so far, the Captain and two acting Captains after him had been incapacitated. If anything happens to the other officers left on the ship, there won't be anyone left to lead the crew. Hence, I have to be the representative."

Elulufay opened her eyes wide when she heard him admitting how desperate his situation was. His bitter expression showed no trace of any deceit.

"… Noted on your situation. Well then, let's hear your terms."

On Elulufay's urging, the pudgy youth took two deep breath and then answered:

"—First, we stop the fight. Next I hope we can help each other to sail back to port."

His proposal made all the Kioka soldiers scratch their head bafflingly.

"— I'm not sure, but are you saying you will surrender? Or are you demanding our surrender?"

"I'm not proposing either. For our two vessels, there is no sense in fighting now."

The sudden words of enlightenment filled Elulufay with doubts. Matthew continued:

"… It's dangerous for our damaged ships to stay in such turbulent waves. Your ship must be taking in water after our collision earlier.

Further fighting serves no practical purpose, so we should help each other sail back to shore."

His argument from an unexpected angle made the Great Mother cast her gaze to the sea that was growing ever more treacherous:

"I see, you have a point… However, we can only do that after the battle has been decided. It might be an emergency now, but we won't allow the enemies that had yet to surrender from entering our port. I will only accept your terms if you surrender your ship."

"Like I said, that don't matter anymore…"

Matthew repeated himself adamantly. Feeling that this conversation was getting nowhere, the Great Mother finally lost her patience.

"Of course it matters! After disarming you and sending you to the calm waters in the gulf, we have to continue our naval battle! This battle decides the fate of our fleet, so we can't let enemies who aren't prisoners go to our rear!"

In response to the harsh tone of Elulufay's counterargument, Matthew shook his head with his gaze low:

"That's what you have gotten wrong— you have a telescope, right? Use it and look over there."

The youth pointed downwind, where the Empire and Kioka fleet were fighting chaotically. Elulufay took out a telescope and look in that direction— a few seconds later, her body turned stiff.

"You get it now? The naval battle is already over."

"—Ah hahaha! What a bountiful harvest!"

A loud laughter erupted on the imperial flagship "Yellow Dragon", which came from a beautiful man— Admiral Erynphin Jurgus. He looked at the allied ships all around him, and appeared very pleased.

"Danmier, make your report as cheerfully as you can! How’s the situation?"

"… Yes Sir. Aside from the 24 surviving ships, we captured 11 Kioka vessels─ making a total of 35. Compared to the start of the battle, our losses are minimal, Admiral."

"That’s right! Oh ho ho ho!"

His bellowing laughter turned into cheers of victory, and spread across the raging sea. On the "Yellow Dragon" he was sailing on, a fleet of comparable number to before the start of the battle sailed in formation. Two thirds were the surviving vessels of the imperial fleet, while the other third were the Kioka three masts warships. However, all these ships were flying the flags of the imperial navy.

"─Ara, I thought it might work, but the results are better than I expected."

On the front deck of one of the imperial warship, "New Moon", a dark haired youth said with a face of surprise and awe. Suya and his other subordinates behind him concurred.

"Suppressing the enemy ship and seizing control. It sound easy on paper, but is difficult to pull off. They have to subdue the enemy crew and strip them of the ability to resist, then send the appropriate personnel to the various parts of the ship. Personnel that had been trained to operate an enemy vessel that had a different structure and environment."

"─But for the personnel involved, this isn’t anything special. Suppress meant capture, and from that moment on, that is their property. That is probably their belief from the start."

Imperial warship "Rising Sun", quarterdeck. Beside the Anti Material Air Rifle that was still warm, Torway who had completed his mission was also watching over the fleet.

"The Kioka fleet’s tactic is to ram into us from upwind, and take down our ship with them. Sacrificing one ship to sink one of ours… But that is too naive. Normally, capturing a ship and turning it around for our own use would take several hours of hard work, and our foes probably drew up their plans with that in mind─"

"But the imperial navy pulled it off in a short amount of time, making it a breeze. They are really showing their unique traits of a pirate navy. Another crucial factor is that the [Yellow Dragon] can readily supply any shortage of personnel."

Yatori said to herself as she watched from the bow of the warship "Fierce Tiger". Beside her was Greg, whom she kept here as she felt it was "too dangerous to let him out of her sight". The Marine Commander who was bound and gagged glared begrudgingly at the girl beside him.

"As the difference in numbers between the two fleets grow, the battle will become easier. The result is an overwhelming victory. Our losses are in no way trivial either… But considering the disadvantage we were at, this is an exemplary result. The battle has already been decided."

"─ It should be clear to you. You can’t turn the tide of battle with just the Blast cannon ships you have on hand."

Matthew said in as somber a voice as he could to Elulufay who was looking through her telescope motionlessly. What he was trying to do, was to convince the enemy commander to admit that she had lost.

"There’s no sense in fighting now. It will just lead to unnecessary bloodshed. Too avoid that, the best option is for our ships to sail to port together."

"……"

"If you insist on fighting, it can’t be helped… We will brace ourselves to trap you here before our allied ships makes it here. It’s

obvious that our side is in bad shape, but we can still stall for time. After all, we can minimize the damage to our fleet by stopping you from linking up with the other Blast cannon ships…"

That last part sounded a little slimy, but that was because Matthew wasn't in the state of mind for sophistry. His nausea and vertigo were despairingly strong, and the agony made him feel that anything was fine now— that was how he actually felt, so his tone sounded firm and convincing.

"… To think I neglected the big picture while my attention was diverted by you all…"

Elulufay finally put down her telescope and said with a bitter face. It was difficult for Matthew to even hear what she said clearly, but Matthew still squeezed out his almost depleted stamina:

"Ughh… No, this is just consequentialism… Our goal is to suppress the Blast cannon ships, we never thought we would fight a one on one battle against the enemy flagship…"

"You know this is the flagship? When…"

"Our crew figured it out by observing the way the signals are sent… I'm sorry, can we leave the detailed explanation for later? I want to finish the negotiations quickly, as you can see, it is dangerous for the ship in this terrible weather."

It was clear from his tone and face that the thing in danger was Matthew's stomach. Elulufay observed the person negotiating with her carefully, and felt her tense nerves relaxing quickly— After troubling over something she didn't really understand herself, she sighed:

"— How sly. You are one of the imperials who killed my beloved children, but for some reason, I don't wish to vent my anger on you… I even feel that delaying the negotiations any longer will be a mistake on our part."

The slightly plump youth didn’t have the energy to respond, and just looked at her with a stiff standing posture. The Great Mother of White Wings looked at this youth and apologized to her troops in her heart─ At the same time, she finally admit that her wings couldn’t bring victory to her beloved children.

"─I accept your proposal. I don’t wish to see unnecessary bloodshed either, so let’s work together to sail to port."

After hearing the enemy commander give the answer he wanted to hear, Matthew wanted to follow the formalities and say:"Thank you for your wise judgement"─ He attempted to say that.

Unfortunately, what came out of his mouth instead was the contents of his stomach that he had been trying to hold back the entire time. For the first time in his life, the youth understood what it felt like to vomit out everything inside him.

Chapter 3: The Shadow by the Side

"—Hey, Midshipman Elulufay. Do I look like someone who likes to meddle in other people's sex life?"

The sun shining in from the west window made the room look bright and clean. But for the girl in uniform sitting in the chair in the middle of the room, the sunlight made it hard for him to see the face of the man seated before me.

"Maybe a little?"

The girl retorted spitefully. In this room where the light and shadow formed a deep contrast, the man place both hands on the heavy wooden desk and worked stubbornly to unravel several entangled metal rings. The girl was watching him move.

"Let me clear this up. That is a misunderstanding. Depending on the circumstances, I might create, remove, or twist the facts, but I won't compromise or lie about [loving freedom more than anyone else]. And of course, that includes the freedom of one's sex life. If it isn't detrimental to public order, I have no problem with whatever fetish anyone might have. It's fine to be very involved in one's sex life."

"That will be a big help."

"Like I said, the precondition is not being detrimental to public order. Unfortunately, an officer cadet bedding whoever she fancies would be detrimental in all sorts of ways."

Creak… the chair the man was sitting on started to creak. The neatly pressed jacket and pants he was wearing were navy blue, and meshed well with the black leather chair he was leaning back in.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with doing that openly in the day."

"It is necessary to discuss the negative impact an exhibitionist would have on society. However, that isn't the main point we are talking about today."

The man stopped fidgeting with his puzzle rings, and looked at the girl.

"I think a girl of your age repeatedly indulging in such sexual acts is a sign of some defect. I hope you can answer honesty without hiding anything. What are you trying to achieve with your contact with those men?"

"……"

"You are smart, at least smart enough to not get addicted to the pleasure of the flesh. I think you are aware of this defect. For example… right— your yearning for fatherly love that you couldn't get."

The man raised a corner of his lips, as if he was saying "How's that, I got the right answer, right"? But when he saw the subject tilt her head puzzledly, he quickly reverted back to a serious face and started struggling with his puzzle rings again.

"Don't worry, my first deduction is usually wrong."

"If you know that, why are you acting so confident about it?"

"The less confidence you have in your words, the more confident you have to look. This is the basics of a politician, and you will do well to remember that."

That ridiculous reason made the girl giggle. She looked at the man who continued challenging the puzzle rings during this entire time, then confessed what she really thought after a slight hesitation:

"It's the complete opposite of your postulation just now… What I want isn't a father, but a child."

"Oh?"

"I want a child that is related to me by blood, and devote all my love to that child for the rest of my life."

"Is it because you want to pass down the skills of the falconer to the next generation?"

"That’s part of the reason. But the main reason is being alone feels too lonely. The people in this nation won’t ostracise me, but they won’t welcome me readily either. There seems to be an insurmountable gulf between each individual, and it feels depressing when I experience it…"

The girl hugged her own shoulders as she said that. At this moment, one segment of the complicated puzzle rings was solved by the man.

"Is that so, you mean living in Kioka feels unpleasant to you?"

The man nodded to show he understands, then grasp his hands together over the puzzle rings:

"I’m glad that you said that honestly and will reflect on it. Since you don’t feel comfortable in this country, I have to share a part of that responsibility too."

After firmly stating his willingness to take responsibility, he returned his gaze to the girl:

"— However, before coming up with a plan, let me confirm something first."

"? What is it?"

"It’s a simple matter. You said you have lots of sex with different men because you want a child. If that is so, you didn’t use any contraceptives, correct?"

"Oh… Yes, I never thought of that."

"And, when did such a behaviour become a routine in your life?"

"That's about… three years ago?"

"And the frequency of sexual intercourse? Roughly how many times per month?"

"In a month… Ehh… Let me count…"

Seeing that the fingers in both hands wasn't enough for her calculation, the man nodded firmly and said: "I understand."

"As I suspect, my worry is true. This must be a painful news to you— no, even if you got pregnant, that will be a difficult situation in another sense."

"… What are you saying?"

"My medical opinion— You had frequent sexual intercourse with numerous men over the past three years, but showed no sign of pregnancy. Is that correct?"

"… Yes…"

"If that is so, then regrettably, I have to make this diagnosis— Midshipman Elulufay, you are infertile. No matter how many men you bed in the future, you probably won't ever get pregnant."

The instant she heard this declaration, the girl felt that the foundation of her world had been shook. Another part of the puzzle rings in the man's hand broke free with a clink.

"… How… How can that be…"

"It must be hard for you to accept this, but at the same time, you don't think I'm lying. You must be filled with anxiety and doubt, since you aren't pregnant after so long."

"……"

"If you wish, I can introduce you to a doctor. But aside from prayers and unorthodox medicine, modern medicine don’t have any means of treating infertility. Until you accept this fact, this diagnosis will probably be repeated to you over and over again."

The man’s calm words pierced the girl’s heart mercilessly. The only hope she had in her lonely life in a foreign land had been crush, and was gradually crumbling.

As the soul of the girl who had lost her spirit faded into the void, the man spoke again, like a devil seizing the right moment to clinch the deal:

"But Midshipman Elulufay, if you tweak your mindset a little, your wish can be realized easily."

"… Huh?"

"You just want to devote your feelings to someone, correct? Then, it don’t have to be a child that shares your blood. If it is someone who honestly accepts your feelings and admires you as a mother, that is as good as any other parent and child bond. This will relieve your loneliness too. I think it’s worth a shot."

"… You want me to adopt orphans?"

"That’s right, aside from your home nation Lao, Kioka also accepted many refugees from the neighboring nations that had fallen. Amongst them are many children who had lost their parents in war."

"……"

"Do you understand? They are lonely existence just like you, and children that you could care for as a mother."

The man’s proposal warmly embraced the girl’s heart that was suspended in mid air. Her spirit started pulsing again with the new light she was given.

The puzzle rings in the hands of the smiling man slipped apart with a clink.

"You just need to refrain from your habit of casaul sex, and don’t do anything unnecessary. Continue your training in the naval military academy and endure it for a while more. I will prepare the things you are craving for, it won’t take too long."

It was almost evening, and the light shining through the window grew more intense. The girl narrowed her eyes because of the sun, and look at the man with pleading eyes. She could see his smile had deepened.

"I promise— not too far in the future, your beloved children will address you as mother."

"—Ugh."

When she heard the footsteps outside the room, Elulufay who was dozing off on a plain wooden chair snapped awake. She focus her mind, then stood up and put on her uniform jacket. When she was done with the buttons, the door happened to be knocked at the same time.

"Enter."

After she answered, the door was opened quietly and a man entered. His army uniform had the epaulette of a First Lieutenant, a dark haired youth that was much younger than he expected.

"Good morning, Tenerexilla-san. Did you sleep well?"

The Great Mother opened her eyes wide in surprise at his warm greeting. To address the imprisoned enemy commander as "san"

despite his relative low rank, he was acting too familiar. Elulufay responded calmly despite the surprise in her heart:

"I slept soundly since this was my base in the first place, isn’t that obvious?"

"If that is true, then your sleeping posture must be amazingly still."

The black haired youth sounded impressed as he looked at the bed in a corner of the windowless room. Elulufay kept quiet as the sheets on the bed was obviously not slept in.

"Not sleeping properly is bad for your skin, and that would be such a pity."

"That is none of your concern, Imperial soldier. I don’t even know your name."

Elulufay cast an accusatory gaze at him, and the youth nodded with a smile:

"Pardon me, I’m First Lieutenant Ikuta Solork of the imperial army, this is my luminous sprite Kusu. Please call me Ik-kun."

Elulufay’s expression stiffen when she heard that name.

"… So you are that hero who gave all sorts of trouble to Jean?"

"I’m honored that you know me, but your impression of me is a little…"

"What other impression are you expecting from us? Speaking of which, I understand now… I can finally accept my defeat. You are the one who lent your wisdom to the imperial navy, which led to my demise, correct?"

"No, I was just slacking off. It’s my comrades who did all the heavy lifting."

The youth answered with a shrug, then walked deeper into the room and sat down on the bed naturally.

"I wish to speak with you, is that fine?"

"I’m a prisoner and you are the victors. Interrogate me if you will."

"No, this isn’t about the military, it’s more like my personal interest."

His black eyes looked straight at the Great Mother’s face without a shred of hostility, and even a hint of closeness. Elulufay couldn’t judge what his intention was.

"Why do the navy sailors address you as [mother]?"

That was an unexpected question. Elulufay couldn’t tell what that youth was thinking, and answered with her own question:

"… What will you do with that knowledge?"

"I want to know you, Elulufay Tenerexilla-san. That’s my goal."

The Great Mother held her peace unhappily. She might be a prisoner, but she didn’t have the obligation to devulge her private past too— sensing that she was closing her heart because of that, Ikuta took the initiative and said:

"About ten years ago, I had a mother. She was the most gentle and kindest woman in the world. If there is still any goodness in my heart, I got most of it from my mother."

"……"

"That might be why I pay more attention to woman older than me. I just can’t leave a crying woman alone."

"… Who is the one crying?"

"You are a mother, a mother will cry at the lost of her children."

The calm words of the youth dealt an unexpected blow to the Great Mother. As if the inside of her tough shell had been hit directly, her lips quivered a little.

"After the conclusion of the naval battle, the captives soldiers all plead for your safety. They didn't care what happens to them, and only wish that we spare the Great Mother… Normally, it should be the opposite. The men will push the blame to their superiors who gave the orders, and hope to be spared― that should be the norm."

"… They… did such a thing…"

"And they will cry for you whenever they can. Thanks to that, we are reaching the limits of keeping you isolated. The guards will probably ask you to help soothe them."

"If it is possible, please let me do that. I have a responsibility to protect those children."

Great Mother nodded repeatedly. Ikuta couldn't bear to see her like this and said:

"…Their skin tone and accent are all slightly different. Most of them lost their family and home country. I suspect that the Kioka fourth fleet were made up mainly of such people. And for you, the [Great Mother of White Wings], you are a survivor of the [Falconer Tribe] from the fallen nation of Lao."

"… That is true, our fleet have gathered many people who have lost their homes."

"I see… This is just like the style of Kioka. They will promote patriotism by saying they are a multicultural country, and at the same time, create a military unit that draws parallel to a family. This exploit the weakness of those who had lost their homes, a brilliant and impressive plan― but I disagree with the vulgar aesthetics of the one who came up with this idea."

Ikuta critiques with a bitter expression. When she heard that, the Great Mother felt the heat got into her head:

"… Can you understand the feelings of a woman who can’t bear children!?"

Her shout echoed in the windowless room for a long time. After realizing what she meant, the youth’s face turned stiff:

"Is that the reason…? Why you took on the role of the soldier’s mother?"

"That’s right! That’s exactly it! My womb can’t bear children, and I can’t become a mother in the same way as most people! That’s why I devote all my feelings into my children who admires me like their mother…!"

"This is not scientific!"

The enraged Ikuta stood up with a start. He approached Elulufay with brisk steps, grabbed her shoulders and shook her as he elaborated with a trembling voice:

"Don’t you understand! People will die in a war! The job of the commander is to sell the lives of the soldiers at a high price! If you continue to run the fleet like a family, you will experience the pain of losing your children whenever war breaks out! Because you are their mother, so this heart wrenching pain will…!"

The youth’s agitated tone made Elulufay forget her anger and just stood there in a daze. What was he saying, and why was he so angry—she couldn’t understand it immediately.

"There is no salvation through this method! The emotions you invested will be lost again, and you just keep accumulating the lamentations and sorrow of a mother losing her child! One day, when you can no longer take this burden, you will be destroyed by this despair! And go down a path that will give you nothing in return…!"

"Ikuta. Calm down, Ikuta."

On the urging of Kusu in his pouch, the youth came back to his senses and backed away from the Great Mother.

"… I'm sorry for being so agitated. My apologies for my crude behaviour."

"… Why are you so angry…?"

Elulufay was clearly baffled, and questioned the youth. Ikuta wanted to say something, but kept his peace after realizing one problem— be it getting her to open up or helping her get over her psychological contradictions, he didn't have the time right now.

"… When this meaningless war ends, I will come see you again. Please be an obedient prisoner in the meantime."

Ikuta said with a bitter expression and turned around. He walked to the door with heavy steps, then added something as if that was an afterthought:

"— Oh right, your pet bird was found by our soldiers, and is nesting at a corner of the [White Wings]'s gundeck for now. Its wing was hit by a bullet, but the bones are fine. We can't tell if it can fly again…"

"—You mean Misai! I-Is that true…?"

"You should be able to see him by today. I wanted to bring this up in the beginning, but it ended up being the last thing, sorry about that… Well then, farewell. Please take care of yourself before we meet again."

The dark haired youth left the room with these words, and closed the door quietly. Elulufay watched him leave with feelings of gladness and confusion. Why did Ikuta Solork visit her? She couldn't tell till the very end.

After an intense battle, the victorious First Imperial Fleet accepted the surrender of the Admiral Elulufay Tenerexilla. They entered the harbor and seized port Nemong, imprisoning most of the enemy troops. They accomplished their mission of gaining control of the southern part of the former eastern territories— that was two days ago.

"—Ara, you haven't went ashore yet, Igsem-san?"

The clear blue skies made the terrible weather during the battle feel like in a dream. The flagship "Yellow Dragon" was berthed at the port. Naval Commander Kanron who was attending to the miscellaneous work on board noticed the vermillion haired girl standing at a corner of the front deck, and spoke with her warmly.

"Yes, Naval Commander Kanron. I'm waiting for a report from my subordinate."

"That is fine and all, but aren't your unit heading off to the Hioredo ore mines today? If you don't rest on land before your trip, it would take more time for your body to shake off the moist air of the sea."

"Thank you for your concern, I will do as you advise once I get my report. I'm starting to miss the land that wouldn't sway."

"Haha, is that right? It's only natural for you to feel that way after experiencing those violent waves. But I heard you had an outstanding performance after charging onto the enemy ship."

"Not really. I wasn't used to fighting on the ship, but I was lucky that my opponent used the wrong tactic."

Yatori answered with a smile, and her subordinates just happen to return back onto the ship through the gangway. They handed a very small item to their commander and whispered a report to her ear. Naval Commander Kanron understood their conversation was over, and was about to turn and leave…

"—Please wait, Naval Commander Kanron."

However, Yatori stopped him with a slightly strong tone.

"? What’s the matter, Igsem-san?"

"It’s regrettable… But before returning to shore, there’s a job I have to do."

The aura around the vermillion haired girl turned serious. All of her subordinates had ran off, as if they were fleeing from her.

Naval Commander Kanron realized that the situation was abnormal.

"Not long ago, a message pigeon was sent from this ship. My subordinates just reported to me the result of that action."

"… What’s going on here?"

Naval Commander Kanron asked with a suspicious attitude, and Yatori explained with a stiff tone:

"Before the naval battle began, aside from the issue of tactics, I had another concern, which was the possibility of our intel being leaked. The surprise attack from downwind was key to this battle, and the plan will fall through the moment the enemy caught wind of it."

"… Ugh…?"

"But given the situation, this concern might seem unnecessary. After all, we are in the middle of the ocean, even if there were traitors in the vessels, they had no way of communicating with the enemy. Even so, I couldn’t dismiss this possibility completely. Because on the [Yellow Dragon] that I was on, there was one possible way of communication."

"… The message pigeons… huh."

"That’s right. By using the pigeon’s ability to fly home from up to 1,000 km away, it might be possible to bring information from the

middle of the ocean to the enemy fleet. This would require a pigeon raised in Port Nemong, but we can’t rule out that the traitor didn’t make the preparations ahead of time."

The pigeon might have been trained further, but since it just had to perform a simple delivery, Yatori excluded the explanation as it was certainly irrelevant.

"… That might be possible, but I think that is being too paranoid."

"Assuming the spy prepared the pigeons ahead of time, there are limited spots for him to safekeep them. It is easy to hide a tree in a forest─ hence, the most sensible way is to mixed it in with the official military pigeons. After all, it is difficult to rear a pigeon in secret on a ship for too long. Even if he did, the pigeon might become too weak when it is time to despatch it. The chance of the pigeon making it back isn’t too high, so one of his problem is that he couldn’t prepare too many of them─ so I conclude that the answer lies with the official military pigeons, and focus on them."

"… If that is so, then the countermeasure is simple, correct? Just don’t despatch the pigeon."

"Yes, I thought of that too. But that only cures the symptoms, and doesn’t get to the root of the problem. So I had a greedier thought, that it would be even better to unearth the traitor─ and had a meeting with Admiral Jurgus."

"……!"

"After explaining the risk of our intel leaking, the Admiral accepted the proposal to not release any pigeons. On one hand, there wasn’t any urgent matters to inform headquarters, and at the same time, the weather was starting to deteriorate, so the chance of establishing control wasn’t too high… So I made another proposal─ pretending to despatch the pigeon, but hiding it somewhere instead."

"…… Ugh!"

"If my worries are true, then a Port Nemong pigeon should be hidden amongst the military pigeons. In other words, it will return to a cage somewhere after it had been released. If we can locate that cage, that will be the best evidence that there is a traitor among us."

By this time, a large number of soldiers had gathered around them, including Torway. Aside from the army personnel, marines armed with cutlass joined the encirclement nonchalantly.

"The pigeons we pretend to despatch were hidden in the bottom deck of the [Yellow Dragon], and were released just twenty minutes ago. We had located the pigeon cages in the port, and assigned men to check on them. The report earlier was about this incident… Regrettably, we found three pigeons from this ship returning to the cage in this port."

Yatori said as she reached into her breast pocket and took out a piece of paper folded many times.

"This letter is found on one of the pigeons, I just got it from my subordinate who went to check the cage."

She then unclench her right fist that was closed this entire time, then unfolded another piece of paper.

"Danmier Kanron… that's the name signed off on it─ Naval Commander, this is something you wrote, correct?"

Yatori showed the note filled completely with words on her hands, and observed with a calm attitude. The soldiers around them watched with bated breath as Naval Commander Kanron spoke expressionlessly:

"…Igsem-san, are you accusing me of being a traitor?"

"The pigeon with this message flew to this port, and the letter on it was written by you. That's the result of my investigation."

"What about the contents? Did it lay out the battle plans?"

"At first glance, it look like a situation report to headquarters. But after reading it a few times, I can spot weird spots in the phrasing and expressions. I suspect that there is a hidden code."

"That’s just your opinion, you don’t know my usual literary style, correct?"

"That’s true. I’m not going to prove there is a hidden code right here, and what I said included all the facts I want to mention― The pigeon with this message flew to this port, and the letter on it was written by you."

Yatori repeated herself, emphasizing her words― She wasn’t interested in being steered off topic on trivial matters, and made that clear to Naval Commander Kanron.

"… How unsightly, Danmier."

At this moment, a tall and beautiful man― Admiral Jurgus, walked in through the encirclement with a tense face. Naval Commander Kanron looked at his superior without any reservation.

"Admiral, do you hold the same opinion? That I am a spy from Kioka?"

"I don’t know. But no matter what the truth is, you are awfully unsightly. If you are really a spy, then you are a fool who got uncovered; if not, you are a fool who got framed… As for me who appointed someone like you as my deputy, I will join the family of fools today too, how splendid."

"… Before confirming if I am guilty, you are admonishing me for being unsightly? That’s just like you."

The soldier under suspicion said with a bitter smile, then raised his arms quietly.

"I will surrender for now. I want to prove my innocence, but that will be difficult, given the circumstances. Confine me to my room or

lock me in the brigg if you want. In the meantime, I will think of a way to show that I’m innocent."

"Yes, I’m looking forward to that. I don’t wish to part with that punchable mouth of yours in such a way either."

Admiral Jurgus ordered the marines with his face still bitter.

"Enough talk, take Naval Commander Kanron to the steerage."

The marines armed with cutlass surrounded the sides and back of the suspect. Urged silently by them, Naval Commander Kanron walked forth obediently. Yatori and Torway went into the ship with a few of their men.

"Can I ask one thing, Igsem-san?"

Naval Commander Kanron asked as he walked down the stairs. Yatori nodded passed the marines escorting him, and he continued:

"There is something I didn’t understand about what happened just now… Seeing how serious you were towards the possibiliity of intel leaks, I presume your preparations weren’t just a precautionary measure, right? You have a strong suspicion of a traitor way before the naval battle."

"It is as you say, I did think there is a traitor. Specifical speaking, I suspect that you are a traitor."

"But why? Did I act or say anything suspicious in front of you?"

"I felt something was wrong during the war conference after the first engagement with the Blast cannon ship. Do you still remember? You insist from start to finish that we should exercise caution and avoid a naval battle."

"Yes, of course I remember, because it was foolhardy for our side to challenge those Blast cannon ships, given our equipment. Even though we won in the end, I still don’t think what I said was wrong."

"I had to object because of my position, but your opinion is smart and valid. Not only did you pointed out the threat of the Blast cannon ships properly, you even criticized the stiff thinking of the high command that [there is no choice but to fight]. I sincerely respect both you, and Admiral Jurgus who is willing to listen."

"Despite how the Admiral might appear, he prefer people who point out flaws curtly over those who conform mindlessly."

"That is admirable for an admiral, but even with that in mind, there are some parts of your explanation that is baffling. Basically, your description of the Blast cannon ships are too detailed."

"… Which part seem suspicious? Blast cannons might not be made by the Empire, but we have gathered plenty of intel on them from the battles in the northern and eastern territories. It's not difficult to work out the range and power from the intel, and I was just building my own theory on top of the information available to me."

"There's nothing wrong with you having these information, but the question is, why isn't this information made known to the entire navy?"

Naval Commander Kanron's shoulders shuddered, and Yatori continued explaining plainly:

"You are Admiral Jurgus' deputy, and your position allows you to make the threat of the Blast cannons known to the entire navy. But the fact is, until the [Tyrannosaur] engaged a Blast cannon ship for the first time, no one in the fleet was wary of Blast cannons. This is one of the reason why the [Tyrannosaur] lost so terribly."

"… It's true that I am familiar with Blast cannons. I must say in my defence that I never thought that weapon will get equipped onto a ship. Because I think of Blast cannons as a land weapon, which is a mental blindspot."

Yatori shook her head with an awkward smile at that retort:

"… Do you remember the first few conversation we had after boarding this ship? [A large ship will naturally be slower, isn't this wrong for a military vessel]— That's what you said. You can calmly give a practical critique against the [Yellow Dragon], which is the symbol of the Imperial navy. My impression of you is that your thinking is very flexible."

"……"

"I think it is unlikely for you to not even entertain the thought of [combining Blast cannons and ships]. If you thought of it but didn't share this with others, that meant you have nefarious intentions towards the imperial navy— Maybe you didn't know, Naval Commander Kanron, but I think very highly of you."

"How troubling, if I had known, I would have acted more stupidly."

Naval Commander Kanron complained with a stiff smile. Yatori didn't reply, ending the conversation.

"Erm… First Lieutenant Yatori Shino, First Lieutenant Torway, here will be fine. We will watch over him before reaching the steerage store room."

One of the marines said hesitantly. Aside from it being inconvenient for so many people to move in the cramped passageway, the marines felt that this was the navy's internal affairs. If the army continued to get involved, it will be an annoyance— Yatori noticed that, and stopped.

"Alright then, I will leave the rest to you."

The marines saluted and acknowledge her with a gaze. Yatori turned, and the marines looked ahead again to resume their duties— it happened at this moment.

Bustling footsteps could be heard in the junction not far ahead. A moment later, a female medic carrying bundles of unwashed sheets appeared around the corner— it was Haro.

"Huff, huff… huh? Uwah!"

The vision of Haro was obscured by the bundle of sheets she was holding as she jogged towards the marines, and she was late in noticing the group blocking the passageway. She managed to stop before colliding with the soldiers in front, but her body still leaned forward.

The sheets flew out from her arms into the air, which drew the attention of the soldiers. Even Yatori's reflex was to focus on her comrade who was about to trip— this moment created an opening.

Danmier Kanron was not just suspected of being a spy, there were evidence to prove that too. However, he had concealed something from everyone. His build was no means tough, had a face mocked by others to be like a servant boy, and gave the impression of being a "brainy strategist who was proficient in debates". Under all these things, he had one final secret even the vermillion haired girl didn't see through.

That was his nature as a Phantom.

"— Ughh!"

Yatori realized a silent movement through the soldiers a moment too late. That figure meandered through the gaps in the crowd, and slid under the sheets in the air to the other side.

"Nobody moves!"

When the white cloth obscuring their vision all fell to the ground, a man with a knife to Haro's throat appeared before them.

"Huh? Huh?"

"You too, Second Lieutenant Haroma Bekker. If you cherish your life."

The man said with his blade to Haro's throat. Yatori pushed aside the marines and rushed to the front with her hand on the hilt of her blade, and grit her teeth:

"I was careless, you are one of the Phantoms…!"

"To be called that in such a situation is terribly embarrassing. Being forced to a corner at the place I have infiltrated and have my identity uncovered─ for someone like me who works in the dark, this is an absolute disgrace."

The man said with self mockery. The next moment, he looked to the back of the soldiers with his sharp eyes:

"Drop the gun, young man of the Remeon house! Don't you care about your comrade's life!?"

"… Ughh!"

Torway who wanted to snipe the enemy from the gaps between the wall of people froze at those words. After he was forced to place the wind rifle on the floor, Naval Commander Kanron nodded and turned his gaze to everyone before him:

"Alright now, the imperial soldier Danmier Kanron will be leaving his post here. I need to go report back to my base, will you kindly help me with that?"

"… What do you want? State your terms."

"Just something simple. Just a horse laden with enough food and water for two days. When I escape far enough from this port, I will return Second Lieutenant Bekker to you."

"I can't accept that. You might take Haro with you, or kill her after getting away. There is no guarantee that you will return the hostage."

Yatori was adamant in her refusal. Naval Commander Kanron pressed his blade into Haro's skin and his smile widened.

"I see, so compared to your comrade's life, Igsem-san values a guarantee more?"

"I'm very sure you can't kill Haro here. You will be subdued the instant you lose your hostage."

"That make sense— why don't I cut off one ear then?"

"Try me. If you are confident you won't lose your head the very moment you slice off her ear."

Yatori took a stance, ready to step forward, draw her blade and strike. Her determined attitude made Naval Commander Kanron who had the initiative waver. Any sudden move, and his head would get lopped off. The member of the Phantom Unit could feel the large gulf in their prowess.

"… I can't beat you. Alright, since it has come to this, I will give you a guarantee. Why don't we do this instead?"

The Phantom proposed. As they faced off against each other perilously, the two sides started a dangerous negotiation.

Admiral Jurgus who noticed that something was amiss and joined in. The tense negotiation reached a conclusion about ten minutes later. Since one of the army's knight corps member "deposited" with them was used as a shield, the boss of the pirate navy couldn't act too forcefully.

Five minutes later, under the orders of Admiral Jurgus, a horse laden with food and water was prepared on land. Naval Commander Kanron and the hostage Haro alighted together, and Yatori followed a set distance behind— the situation had evolved into this state.

"This is incredibly unsightly— Both you and me."

Before the three of them alighted, the boss of the pirate navy said to his former deputy with a scary glare. The Phantom who had discarded the fake persona of Danmier Kanron replied:

"I feel the same. It was just an act, but working under you wasn’t too bad."

Ending the conversation for probably the final time with Admiral Jurgus, the Phantom alighted the ship with his hostage. Amidst the tense atmosphere, the silent trio left the port and reached a wide open path. As promised, a horse was tied to a pole there.

"Okay, Second Lieutenant Bekker, please untie the rope on the pole."

On the instruction of the Phantom, Haro reached for the rope with her trembling fingers. Yatori observed a short distance away. The Phantom cautiously gauged his distance from her, slowly backed away from Haro and put a hand on the saddle.

"I’m ready."

"I’m ready too. Haro, undo the ropes now."

Phantom judged that this was sufficient space to escape the vermillion haired girl, and Yatori gauged that she could rescue Haro if anything untowards happen at this range— Both conditions had been met, and Haro undid the ropes.

"Hyah—!"

The horse trotted off at the same moment the man flipped onto the saddles. On the other hand, Yatori charged to Haro and shield her, and watch the back of the Phantom gradually fade into the distance— she felt regret for being played by the enemy, but her relief on the safe return of her comrade was still stronger.

"Haro, I’m glad that you are okay…!"

Yatori let go of the hilts of her blade, and hugged her comrade who returned unharmed. Haro rest her head in Yatori’s breasts and mumbled quietly:

"I’m sorry, Yatori-san…"

"What are you saying, I should be the one who should apologize. I should be more vigilant towards him."

Her lapse in judgement resulted in her comrade meeting with danger─ that was what Yatori thought. Yatori showed deep self reproach and reflection, and Haro kept repeating herself.

"I’m sorry… I’m sorry…"

Tears appeared on the corners of her eyes─ only she knew the true meaning behind her words.

Before they could recover from the blow of this unexpected incident, the members of the knight order still set off for the Hioredo ore mines on the same day as scheduled. They formed a supply unit with the troops under their command, and prepared to leave Port Nemong.

"Hey～ My platoon is ready too…"

Matthew who didn’t look too good returned to his comrades. And so, the five members of the knight order and Princess Chamille were all present.

"Thank you for your hard work, my dear friend Matthew. It seems you have not recovered fully yet."

"I can’t eat well… And the ground still seem to be shaking. To be frank, I really want to rest here for another three days."

"I feel the same, but we are already behind schedule in reaching the port, so we have to set off earlier to make it in time."

Torway patted Matthew’s listless back, and the pudgy youth lifts his head a little.

"Speaking of which, while I was writhing in bed, something outlandish happened, huh… I heard that Naval Commander Kanron is actually a traitor aiding Kioka?"

"More accurately speaking, he is a spy who infiltrated the navy in order to achieve that goal. I failed to detect that he was actually a member of the Phantom unit. I was too naive and put Haro in danger…"

"N-No, it’s not Yatori-san’s fault! It’s all because I fell down in that situation…!"

When left alone, Yatori would reflect on her actions, and Haro would start explaining in tears. As the atmosphere grew heavy, Ikuta butt in between them.

"Alright now, it’s fine since we are all safe. The spy might have gotten away, but just chasing him out of the navy is a big accomplishment. If you didn’t see through Naval Commander Kanron’s true colours, our intel will continue to leak. It won’t be an exaggeration to call Yatori the saviour of the navy."

"Enough, what follows is the tough part. He might not be the only spy, and Admiral Jurgus will be busy screening his subordinates."

Yatori sighed again. The Princess then cast her gaze at the pudgy youth:

"Speaking of Admiral Jurgus, he seem rather fond of Matthew. He mentioned about approaching you to join the navy."

"P-Please spare me that. Just the thought of boarding a ship makes my stomach…"

Matthew shook his head with his hands on his chest, and the dark haired youth interjected with a nefarious smile.

"No no～ given how active a role you played this time, it is no surprise that they want to recruit you. I heard from the sailors on the [Spearfish] that you convinced the enemy admiral to surrender with your skilled negotiation techniques."

"Negotiation…? Ah, no, that's…"

I found a way because I thought about what you said in the past…

Matthew wanted to say that, but kept his peace. It felt vexing to say that before Ikuta. As Matthew was troubling over this, Ikuta continued:

"Ara, I would have never imagined. Instead of pleading in tears, you took the offensive with vomiting. Your creativity deserves the highest order of respect. You should take pride for inventing the new niche of [vomit diplomacy], Matthew!"

"So that's what you're talking about! I can't help it, the sailing before that was insane! And I didn't vomit during the negotiation, but after it had been settled!"

Matthew refuted him fiercely despite feeling unwell. Ikuta wanted to tease him further, but shut his mouth midway and pointed to his front:

"Matthew, look behind you. Admiral Jurgus isn't the only one who can't bear seeing you go."

"Huh?"

The youth turned back and found a familiar face hiding in the tree shade some distance away. She noticed that she had been seen, and after a while, she made up her mind to approach him.

"Naval Lieutenant Polminue……"

Her left arm was injured during the naval battle and was hanging in a triangular arm sling before her breasts. Her strides seemed a little

unsteady, probably a symptom of anemia she had not recovered from. Pommy stopped before Matthew, and looked at him with her back straightened.

"Y-You are going?"

"Huh? Ah, yes. We landed later than expected, so we can’t rest and take it easy."

"Is that so…"

Pommy kept quiet after that, and Matthew didn’t know how he should respond. Finally, Pommy made up her mind, took out something from her pocket and proffered it to him:

"… Take this as an amulet!"

The item in question was a portable compass with an in built sundial. It looked really old, and the metallic part was worn out, which gave it more character… but there wasn’t any rust, which made it clear that the owner took a lot of care to maintain it.

"Ah… Oh… This is…?"

"It’s the compass Captain Garciev used when in his youth… the family heirloom of my Jurgus house."

The moment he heard that, Matthew almost dropped it. He held on the compass with a firm grip, and then looked at her in surprise:

"I-Is this the real thing…? Can I really have such a precious item!? No, I’m very grateful, but…!"

"I-I’m just lending it to you…! You must return it to me the next time we meet! Don’t forget that!"

Pommy’s tense expression made the slightly plump youth a little scared… But the youth changed his mind after seeing the sincerity in her eyes, and felt it was impolite to be too reserved.

Matthew stared at the compass in his hand, pondered for a moment, and then reached into his breast pocket with his left hand.

"… It isn't fair for me to be the only one borrowing this, so take this with you."

The youth proffered a tiny silk pouch. After letting Pommy hold it, he continued:

"It might be lame, but inside is a bent coin. I heard that when my great grandfather was shot on the battlefield, this thing blocked the bullet and saved his life. It's basically a lucky charm for my Tetzirich house… and can't compare with Captain Garciev's compass at all."

Pommy took the charm from Matthew who was smiling awkwardly, and pressed it against her chest.

"… Thank you, I will cherish it. I will return it to you the next time we meet."

"Yes, I will do the same too. I'm borrowing the Captain's luck after all, and I won't be able to face him in that world if I die that easily."

After they both put away their exchanged keepsakes, a silence fell between them. As they were both inexperienced in all sorts of matters, it seemed that this silence would continue for a long time— however, the courage she inherited from her great ancestor pushed Pommy to overcome her hesitation.

"Don't you die on me, dummy!"

She took a step forward and hugged the pudgy youth with her right arm. For a short instance, her soft lips touched his cheek— before he could even react, Pommy had already turned and ran. She was even trying to hide her blushing face.

"……"

Given the results, her decision was probably right. Because Matthew who got petrified from the shock needed several minutes before he could move again.

Chapter 4: Battle of the Hioredo ore mines

For most imperial citizens, the blazing summer heat was the norm. However, the heat in the eastern territories was different. Simply put, it was very humid. Compared to the hot and dry climate, the humid environment allowed the vegetation to flourish a lot more. After all sorts of conditions come together, the result was a tropical jungle. The diverse ecosystem of the forest provide a lot to mankind, but also create all sorts of problems.

"Uwah, it even stuck on to such a place, what a pain."

Major Sazarf took off his boot and rolled up his pants as he grumbled. The stubbled he shaved off during his time in central had reverted back to normal. The thing he was staring at with a frown was a brown and soft creature sucking on his thigh.

"It’s mud and swamp wherever we go. I’m going to collapse from anemia from all the blood lost to the leeches."

The fire sprite the Major borrowed from a subordinate was standing by his leg. When the flame licked the tail of the leech, it vomit out the blood it just suck and fell off.

"Major General Saba, don’t you think so?"

In the same tent, his superior who took care of the leeches earlier than him grunted in his seat:

"… Insignificant. Instead of anemia, we should be worried about the possibility of diseases from the leeches."

His usual cold response put Major Sazarf at ease.

Major General Kubalha Saba was appointed as the commander-in-chief for the campaign to attack the Hioredo ore mines. A buffed man with a beard on his jaw and a serious expression on his face. With his

silent personality, he was the sort who could apply pressure without even speaking.

Sazarf was troubled about how he should communicate with his new superior. Because no matter what topic he raised, it would get shot down with the word "Insignificant". Since they started the march, Sazarf didn't recall making any normal conversations with him, aside from official reports.

— Well, we are just a superior and a subordinate, I'm not trying to get all buddy buddy with him or anything.

Sazarf thought as he peeked at him. Saba's face was still serious without any hint of emotion.

— But even so, I really can't tell what he is thinking. That's not good.

For Sazarf, not being able to tell what his commander-in-chief was thinking presents a serious problem. In the northern territories and even before that, he would grasp the character, capability and tendencies of his superior, and use that as a guide to act accordingly.

With a superior that was capable in everything, he just needs to follow orders. But if that wasn't the case, he would need to find a way to guide his superior to tweak the orders. For those who were more reserved, he would encourage them to make a decision, and he would advise the rash type to change his mind. As for those who refuse to listen to others, he will disguise his advise in the form of flattery— no matter what, he needed to understand what kind of person his superior was.

—

He looked like a competent soldier, but he didn't seemed to be someone who was eager to net achievements. In a sense, that was better than another superior I had…

Sazarf still remembered clearly the military tribunal that was the end of his previous superior. Major General Saba was present too, but Sazarf didn’t recall him speaking. If he remembered correctly, Saba was silent for the entire trial, similar to now.

—It feels like he lack any motivation or drive, what should I do…

As Sazarf was thinking while drying his feet, a voice saying "reporting!" came from the entrance of the tent. Major General Saba gave his permission quietly, and the young messenger entered the tent with a cheerful face:

"The 2nd supply unit from the sea has arrived! The Third Princess and the members of the knight order are with them!"

Sazarf’s spirit was raised greatly when he heard that report. He stuck his feet that was still moist into his boot and stood up:

"Those guys are here, huh…! Oh, I should go welcome them!"

He looked to his superior for approval, but Major General Saba was still silent.

Even if it is just a farce, he should at least pretend to be happier

— Sazarf retorted in his heart and proposed to his commander:

"Major General, the Third Princess has graced us with her presence. I heard the young heroes are with her, which is a good chance to raise morale. The other high ranking officers are away on duty, should we go receive them?"

Sazarf said worriedly, and wondered what he should do if he was dismissed with another "Insignificant". However, the old soldier wasn’t that dense. He nodded slightly, and got up from his chair a little lethargically.

"But we don’t have any good news to share with them."

The Major General muttered before leaving the tent. Realizing that he just said "Insignificant" in a different way, Sazarf could only sigh.

The terrain of the Hioredo ore mines was roughly divided into four elements. The jungle around them; A mountain range that reached up to 600m high; a bowl shaped large hole dug down from the mountain; and a settlement that encircled the hole. The ore mines settlement had the shape of a donut.

Similar to the former eastern territories as a whole, this Hioredo ore mines was a hotly contested spot between the Empire and Kioka. Hence, the Empire also contributed to its current terrain. Maintaining the function of the ore mines and raising its defensibility— after both sides worked on this place with this common goal in mind, this was the final result.

"Easy to defend and hard to attack. It is dependable as a military base, but it will be troublesome if the enemy turtle themselves inside— munch munch."

Ikuta observed with his telescope on a ridge as he chew on a wild banana he picked along the way.

"—We are the ones attacking this time, and as expected, we are at an impasse."

The others looking through their telescope nodded in agreement. The Imperial army had surrounded the Hioredo ore mines with a road that encircled the forest. The enemy on top of the mountain was isolated, and could only stay on the defensive and engage the Imperial army in shooting skirmishes.

As the six of them were sizing up the situation, two officers came from the base situated ahead, with a large group of men in tow. One of them was a buffed, middle aged soldier, and the other was someone the knight order was very familiar with.

"Thank you for coming with reinforcements! It must have been tough to go through a naval battle before reaching here! As expected of the renown knight corp!"

Major Sazarf started with a salute and formalities. As this contrasted with his usual casual tone, Matthew and Haro opened their eyes in surprise. The other four understood the situation with a glance. He was probably trying to milk this situation to raise the morale of the troops, which was why he spoke loud enough for the entire camp to hear. When the battle reached a stalemate, the soldiers tended to get too laxed.

"Thank you for receiving us, Major General Saba, Major Sazarf. We arrived later than scheduled, so we hope to make up for that."

"Ohh, you are really motivated, First Lieutenant Yatori Shino! Isn't that reliable, Major General!?"

Major seeked the consensus of his superior beside him, and Major General Saba ignored him as if it was only natural. He then knelt before Princess Chamille:

"… My apologies for troubling you to visit the frontlines, Your Highness. I regret to report that we have not taken the ore mines. We might be outside their firing range, but please be careful of ricochets."

"Oh… Yes, I understand."

"I'm honored by your presence─ Well then, allow me to return to my duties. Major Sazarf, I will leave the rest to you."

Major General Saba turned before waiting for an answer, and walked towards the base. Sazarf turned to the Princess who was looking at Saba leave in a daze, and tried to lighten the mood:

"T-The Major General is very busy, and despite how he looked, he is really glad to meet everyone! A-Anyway… let's start the handover of the supplies!"

The Major changed the topic forcefully, so Yatori and the others left the awkward atmosphere behind them and called for their subordinates standing behind them. The soldiers felt dubious of the Major General’s cold attitude, but as they busied themselves in the handover procession, such feelings subsided. After about 30 minutes, they finished their tasks.

"Alright, thank you for your hard work! We have prepared tents in the western side of the base. You can let your troops rest there and wait for their next orders."

"That’s great— you heard that, Suya? Can I leave that to you?"

"Yes Sir!"

Suya left with her orders and started gathering the troops. The other deputies mimicked her and started making arrangement to make camp. The battalion assigned to Ikuta and the others moved into the camp, leaving the members of the knight order, the Princess and Sazarf behind.

"I hope you can explain the situation… regarding a lot of things."

After the dark haired youth made this request, Major Sazarf scratched his head a little awkwardly.

"… As you can see, we have encircled the enemy, but their defences are too strong. It’s too dangerous to attack rashly, so we are thinking of harassing them and make this a battle of attrition."

"That’s true… in this situation, forcing the enemy to deplete their resources by attacking them continuously, and pressuring them from multiple avenues to force them to surrender. That’s the most common tactic."

Torway gave his opinion. When attacking a high defensible fort or stronghold, that would require a force several times larger than the enemy and several months of time— or even years if their luck was

bad. That was how difficult it was to attack the enemy holed up in a great defensive structure. Hence, they would normally target the enemy’s weak points.

"Since the encirclement is complete, that means the enemy’s supply route has been cut off. If we keep up the assault, their resources like food, water and ammunition will run out sooner or later, correct?"

Matthew asked optimistically, and the Major crossed his arms with a sour face:

"… Sooner or later? That is true, but the problem is, we don’t know when. The enemy base has an independent water source, and they had probably stowed quite a bit of food for such emergencies. Another problem is, their base is an ore mine settlement which has the facilities to process steel."

"I see, so the enemy can produce their own bullets and arrows… That will be a problem. In that case, the only thing they might run out of is food."

Yatori thought with her hand on her chin. A moment later, Ikuta beside her said:

"Be it food, water or ammunition, cutting off their supplies will grind away the enemy mentally, correct? In that case, we don’t have to stick to one method, there are many ways to harass the enemy that had holed themself up. We can throw things that can causes diseases, or taunt them with a large amount of troops, or hold a feast in front of them to flaunt how much excess resources we have…"

"A feast? That’s a good idea… I agree with you, please proceed with that plan First Lieutenant Ikuta. However, you will have to convince the commander-in-chief."

"You mean Major General Kubalha Saba? From what I see earlier, he didn’t seem to welcome us too much."

Princess Chamille who spoke directly with the Major General muttered, and Major Sazarf quickly lowered his head to apologize:

"My apologies if he upsetted you, Your Highness. Allow me to explain, the Major General treat everyone the same way, and he had been ignoring me after my assignment here… I had never seen him smile before."

Sazarf explained with an awkward smile. A female officer who noticed the conversation here walked over:

"Excuse me, I happen to overhear your conversation… please allow me to apologize on the Major General's behalf, Your Highness. I have heard the exploits of you and the members of the knight order, and am heartened by your reinforcement."

The female officer smiled gently after saying that. She was about 30 years old, and her rank insignia on her breast was that of a Major. Sazarf who held the same rank as the lady suddenly waved his hands anxiously:

"M-Major Melza…! No, I don't mean to demean the Major General…"

"It's fine, Major Sazarf, I know how you feel. I can't understand the Major General either. Since you are the hero of the northern unrest, you must be frustrated by this situation, correct?"

She expressed her understanding calmly, and Sazarf couldn't say anything. Major Melza smiled at him, then returned her gaze on the members of the knight order:

"Pardon my late self introduction, I'm Major Minai Melza, I hope you can remember me. As you will be rostered under Major Sazarf, you won't be reporting directly to me…"

"No, your beautiful name has already been carved deeply into my mind! By the way, Melza-san, are you still single─ uwah!"

Ikuta entered flirting mode immediately and was approaching the lady when Major Sazarf suddenly grabbed Ikuta’s head with both hands from behind.

"Hahaha, this guy is my cute subordinate, his so cute that I just can’t let him go."

"Wait… What are you doing, Major…! My skull will crack, are you serious!? Uwahhh!"

Sazarf put the struggling Ikuta in a hold as he showed a gentleman’s smile to Major Melza. She smiled at the sight of their interaction, then sighed as if she thought about something:

"Major General used to be cheerful… But he became like this after Lieutenant General Rikan passed away."

The familiar name made the knight corp members open their eyes wide. After a while, Yatori and Torway nodded with an enlightened attitude.

"… That’s right, Major General Saba was assigned with the defence of the eastern territories two years ago too."

"I remember in the ending of the Two-front War, Major General Saba was the commander of the retreating unit. And in the end, he was the only general who survived…"

"That’s correct… With that experience in mind, he was appointed the commander-in-chief for the invasion of the eastern territories. As a Major General, he couldn’t refuse this assignment, but he must feel very conflicted about this. High command tasked him with the mission to retake the ore mines. In that case, why didn’t they order him to defend the territories properly in the first place…?"

At this point, Major Melza shut her mouth. She probably noticed that she might end up criticizing the royal family if she continued.

The Major shook her head lightly, then turned towards the members of the knight order again:

"— I only ask that you believe me when I say this; no matter what complicated thoughts is troubling Major General Saba, he won't take his duties lightly… As long as he stays a soldier, he will guide us towards victory. You will understand that one day, Major Sazarf."

After saluting everyone, Major Melza left the place. The group remained quiet with complicated feelings, and Yatori suddenly spoke:

"…Major Sazarf, if you keep doing that, your clothes will get dirty."

"Huh?"

Sazarf who was watching Major Melza walking away cast his gaze down when he heard that. The black haired youth he was strangling in his arms was frothing at the mouth.

"… Woahh! S-Sorry! I used too much strength!"

After letting go in a panic, Ikuta collapsed and started spasming. After doing that for a while, he regained consciousness. Propping himself up from the muddy ground with both hands, he said with his lips trembling in anger:

"Not only did you left us alone in the northern territories, you treat me in such a way now…! I won't stand for this!"

"S-Sorry, it's my bad. So don't be so mad."

"Don't think you can protect Major Melza's chastity until day break!"

"… Huh? What are you talking about? Are you going to assault the enemy's base by today?"

"Oh no, somebody stop them! Their eyes are serious!"

"Don't start your own war in a place like this～!"

Matthew and Haro were frantic and wanted to stop them, but the two of them refused to back down as they stare at each other with stiff smiles. The subject in question wasn't aware about this, but a pointless battle was about to erupt— at this moment, something collided into Ikuta's back, sending him flying like a piece of garbage.

"Mission complete! Major, reporting in!"

The person who kicked up a wave of mud stopped before Sazarf, and did a textbook perfect salute. She wore light armor over her uniform, had a two handed sword on her waist, and reddish brown long hair flowed down her back and ears. This gallant figure that seemed to hail from one era ago, and the swell in her chest was the only indication of her gender.

"We have sent everyone from the unit to chop two days worth of firewood from the forest! We are letting it dry under the sun, please inspect them when you are free!"

"Ahh… Thank you for your hard work… You must be tired, why don't you rest in your tent…?"

"Hahaha! Surely you jest! I won't feel tired from gathering firewood! Please give me your next order, Major! My knight spirit is on the verge of erupting!"

<TL: 騎士道>

The girl clenched her fist in a show of valor. This intimidating aura and determination to live the way of a knight jarred the memories of the knight order members:

"How should I put this… this feeling...""I have an impression of this…""This feels familiar…"

Matthew, Haro and Torway narrowed their eyes and stared at the girl. At this moment, her partner water Sprite waved from her pouch. The answer was flashed across the trio's mind─ and a few second later, Major Sazarf said:

"Ah～ let me introduce you… This is Warrant Officer Lucanti Hargunska, the leader of my light cavalry escort detail. Well, as you can tell from her name…"

"She is Warrant Officer Deinkun's younger sister.""Yes, I can tell. Long time no see, Niki."

Princess Chamille and Yatori nodded. Warrant Officer Lucanti seemed to finally notice the knight order members, and knelt with her eyes wide open Third Princess has graced us with her presence!"

"Please, be at ease. You will dirty your clothes. Do stand up, Warrant Officer Lucanti."

The Princess bent forward and offered her hand, and the tears flowed from the girl's eyes.

"You are too kind to someone as insignificant as me…! I, Lucanti, am in tears from being so moved, and can't raise my head!"

"No, even if you say that, it's troubling if you don't get up…"

On the repeated urging of the troubled Princess Chamille, Warrant Officer Lucanti, brushed away her tears with the back of her hand, and then got up. After saluting the Princess, she turned towards the vermillion haired swordsman.

"You must be First Lieutenant Yatori Shino Igsem! My brother mentioned that he had been in your care in the northern territories!"

"I'm the one who was in his care. In the battlefield that grows harsher with every moment,your brother held strong to his knightly ideals. His determined and pure figure had given us much salvation."

Yatori said sincerely. When she heard this, the girl started tearing up again:

"B-Before the outbreak of the unrest, I received a letter from my brother. He mentioned that he had a duel with First Lieutenant Yatori Shino who was newly assigned to his unit, and suffered a complete lost… He also said─ that you are a person beyond his expectation, and felt the bout was an honor even though he lost. He hoped that I can meet you one day."

"I am honored to hear that."

"B-But I feel frustrated about my brother's loss… I can't accept how helpless my brother was at the loss, and was late in my reply. And while I was still being childish about it, the unrest broke out… and my brother headed onto the battlefield."

"… I see…"

"Before the letter I sent in a panic reached him, my brother fell in battle. During my long period of mourning, I always wondered my brother's last moments… I have heard about it from others many times, but I still hope you can tell me in person, First Lieutenant Yatori Shino. My brother… Deinkun Hargunska, did he fought bravely as a knight til the end?"

Yatori nodded without hesitation to her query:

"I swear on my blades─ Deinkun Hargunska ended his life admirably. He was a knight that loved his nation and fellow countrymen, and lived without any taint on his reputation. If anyone dare speak ill of his way of life, I won't condoned it even if others will."

The Imperial Knight placed her hands on the hilt of both her blades, and swore solemnly. It wasn't clear what the deeply moved Warrant Officer Lucanti was thinking when she heard that, and she turned and ran away at full speed.

"Woaahhh!"

She returned less than a minute later with two wooden practice swords in her hands. She proffered one of them as she bow and pleaded sincerely:

"Please give me your guidance! I hope to mourn for my brother by sparring with you!"

Major Sazarf who was watching from the side cut in frantically at the sight of this development:

"H-Hey, Warrant Officer Lucanti. I understand how you feel, but there is a time and place for this…"

"I don't mind, Major. With your permission, I would like to practice with my enthusiastic junior."

Yatori seeked approval with her gaze. Since she made this into an official training session, Sazarf didn't have any reason to reject her. He turned his head and checked their surroundings:

"… Never mind then. Please make it quick. If you cause any commotion and it reaches the ears of Major General Saba, I will be the one to get into trouble."

"Understood─ Well then, let's start right now. You may attack however you like, Warrant Officer Lucanti."

Yatori raised her sword with her right hand and urged her opponent. Warrant Officer Lucanti saluted and took a middle guard stance, used the tip of her sword to touch the tip of Yatori's blade, and then stepped forward suddenly with an attack:

"Pardon me!"

The opening strike was aimed at the the wrist guard. To prevent Yatori from counterattacking, the young knight continued her barrage

of attack. Despite the onslaught of fast and precise strikes, the red swordsman dodged with nimble footwork and body movement.

"… That's right, it was like this back then too…"

Princess Chamille mumbled as she watched the fight. For her, memories of the previous war seemed to be a lifetime ago— the past was gone forever, and no matter how similar this scene was to what she saw last time, Warrant Officer Deinkun would still be dead.

"Hyaa!"

Warrant Officer Lucanti's movement grew in intensity. Her waist and feet must have been through extraordinary training for her to perform the impressive feat of seven consecutive strikes. Yatori was impressed as she dealt with each attack, but didn't miss the opening on the last strike— her opponent's center of gravity was slightly off balanced.

"— Hmm!"

Yatori parried the strike that didn't have the full force of her opponent's body behind it, and her sword tip slashed at Lucanti's wrist. With a bone numbing impact, the wooden sword fell from Warrant Officer Lucanti's hand.

With the match decided, both parties stopped moving. After a moment of silence, the challenger smiled.

"… I get it now. I'm far from being your match, and my brother couldn't have beaten you."

"I'm the one who is surprised. You are better than I expected, and has stronger swordsmanship than your brother… This might sound patronizing, but if you continue to improve, we will have an even better match in five years."

The red swordsman handed the borrowed sword to her opponent hilt first and offered words of encouragement to her junior. For the

pure girl knight, this direct compliment was too stimulating. Warrant Officer Lucanti was so moved that she was trembling, and bowed with a lot of force:

"I-It’s my honor! Ahhh, the way of the knight is awesome!"

After shouting something dubious, Warrant Officer Lucanti charged towards the base. The members of the knight order looked on with a daze, and Sazarf clapped his hands to draw their attention:

"Alright, that’s all for now. Just put your bags down in the camp for now. First Lieutenant Ikuta and First Lieutenant Yatori Shino, please come to headquarters after doing so, I need you to help me with something."

"Working right after coming here? What a pain~ as if I came here to work."

"Don’t make it sound as if that’s not the case. Both you and me—I will escort Princess Chamille to her quarters first. Your Highness, this way please."

Yatori offered her right hand with a smile, and the Princess wanted to take the hand on reflex. But she retracted her hand as if she had changed her mind. This action baffled the vermillion haired girl, and Princess Chamille turned as if she was avoiding Yatori’s gaze:

"… N-No need, I have other escorts too. I can go over myself if I know the place."

After announcing that in a stiff tone, the Princess asked Sazarf for directions to her quarters, and moved quickly to camp. Her escorts rushed to catch up with her.

Yatori, who had been turned down in a roundabout way, alternate her gaze between the back of the Princess who was walking away and her own extended hand.

"I want you to accompany me to negotiate with the enemy."

After Ikuta and Yatori settled the administrative duties they had on hand, Major Sazarf got right to the point.

"As you know, in this situation, the importance of psychological warfare is as critical of direct combat. A common tactic is to push for talks, and the enemy is willing to do so. We already met with the enemy commander three times."

"In that case, you have tried pressuring them to surrender. What’s their response?"

"Yes, about that… They shot us down completely the first time, and reacted a little during the second time. After we told them news of your naval battle victory, they were clearly shaken. They probably don’t want to prolong a losing battle, so I thought there might be a chance…"

At this point, Sazarf frowned and scratched his head.

"… Yesterday, a balloon flew in from the east and landed in the enemy base. We met for the third time right after that, but their attitude changed for some reason… and expressed with confidence that they had no plans of surrendering. They are ready to hang on until reinforcement comes to relief them, and they advise us to give up and go home. My expectation was completely overturned, so I could only return to base depressed."

"What about the enemy troops? If they are only bluffing, the troops on the frontlines should show signs of having low morale."

"Regrettably, they didn’t show such signs at all. In fact, their morale seemed higher than we first fought. That balloon is probably the reason why the enemy had toughened up mentally despite their disadvantageous situation."

Ikuta and Yatori thought about their superiors observations, and Sazarf continued:

"Even though getting them to surrender is no longer possible, I still want to figure out the [reason] behind their change of heart. That's what I need you to figure out. First Lieutenant Ikuta, that's right up your ally, right?"

"Hmm… Major, are you mistaking me for a proficient conman?"

"I don't think he's mistaken about that─ speaking of which, are you asking me to act as an escort for the next meeting, Major?"

"Assigning you to escort duty is a major factor. We might be protected by the laws of wars, but the negotiation with the enemy is still dangerous… However, the main reason is having both of you together will be a big help. Instead of acting alone, having you two team up will yield better results. That's what I think, so how about it?"

Sazarf said with a faint smile. The 2 First Lieutenants looked at each other, and saluted at the exact same moment.

The Empire set their camp around the foot of the mountain, while the enemy's base was at the top of the mountain. Hence, the venue for their talks was on a road between them. During their ascent up there, Ikuta kept grumbling.

"Ahh, what a drag. Hiking up a hill is so tiring, I hate it. I already climbed enough for a lifetime during my stint in the Arfatra mountain…"

"Save your strength for your feet. Compared to the Stairs of God, this is no different from a gentle slope."

"That's right! And showing your weakness on a mountain trail like this isn't good! First Lieutenant Solork, please join me every morning for a thousand practice sword swings every morning to train up!"

Warrant Officer Lucanti who was accompanying Major Sazarf and leading her section of escorts cried out energetically. The dark haired youth slowed his pace with an exhausted face:

"Please don’t force that unscientific psychological view on me… It will make me tired even before we reach our destination."

Ikuta was full of complaints, but this wasn’t a trechourous mountain, so the group reached their destination easily as they chatted. On an open flat space near the trail was a tent surrounded by red and white checkered flags, symbolizing the place for both sides to negotiate. The laws of war prohibits fighting in such a venue, or the removal of these flags without the consent of both parties.

"I’m Major Senpa Sazarf of the imperial army, here to conduct the fourth round of negotiation! Two of my subordinates will be joining me, will that be acceptable with you?"

A moment later, the enemy soldier standing guard at the tent informed that his request was accepted. Sazarf’s party nodded to each other and walked forth. Warrant Officer Lucanti and her men stayed at the entrance, while the trio entered the tent…

"—You are finally here, hum*. We have been waiting—"

<TL: the * indicates engrish words as they appear in the raw>

The voice greeting them stopped for some reason. At the same time, Ikuta and Yatori stopped in their tracks and froze.

There was a large table in the center of the wide tent. Three empty chairs were placed side by side near Sazarf’s group, and their counterpart had the same number of chairs. A white haired soldier was sitting in the chair in the middle, with the chairs beside him vacant. A buffed man and a sensible looking lady stood on either side of him. However...

""""""Ahh—!""""""

The instant their gaze met, the group shouted at the same time─ This was the second meeting between the "Sloth"and the "Insomniatic". This was recorded in the history books as an important event, but it started off in a silly manner.

It had been five minutes since everyone took their seats, but no one had spoken yet. The oppressive silence hung over the meeting table, and the first one to give in to the atmosphere was Major Sazarf.

"… Ah～ isn't this interesting? The representatives for both sides are different this time…"

"… Indeed. I'm Colonel Jean Arkinex of the Kioka army. I have taken over command of the Hioredo ore mines."

Sazarf opened his eyes wide in surprise when he learned his counterpart's name. During the northern unrest, Ikuta and Yatori were the only ones who met him, so this was the Major's first meeting with the famous "General of Insomniatic Brilliance".

"Sigh… I shouldn't have come… You are too much, Major. This isn't a puzzle at all."

Sazarf was wondering how he should respond when Ikuta who was resting both elbows on the table lazily grumbled. The white haired officer shot him an accusatory gaze, then said sarcastically:

"Hah*

…Major Sazarf, one of your members appears to be lacking manners. His presence isn't appropriate for this solemn meeting, so can you just bury him somewhere?"

"Speaking of manners, how about serving some tea, white pretty boy? The thought that I hiked all the way here to see that mug of yours make me feel like crying. How are you going to compensate the sense of futility in my heart?"

The dark haired youth retorted immediately. Jean’s face kept twitching as he answered:

"Speaking with you is such a pain. It makes me wonder what kind of environment nurtured your personality that is only good for agitating others?"

"If you feel that way, that means you are already drained mentally. Why not devote your life in proving that the lack of sleep leads to anxiety and frustration?"

"Someone who talks like that definitely oversleep often. Just how crude do you have to be to stay calm as you waste the limited time you have?"

They exchanged sarcastic words like a shoot out, going back and forth without any rest. The vermillion haired girl raised a hand to stop the useless talk and mediate:

"Calm down, both of you. We are not here to squabble."

Yatori’s calm and firm demeanour restored order to the scene─ After Ikuta and Jean shut up, someone else spoke:

"─First Lieutenant Yatori Shino Igsem, there is something I would like to ask you."

The lady serving as Jean’s adjutant looked at Yatori with her sharp eyes behind her glasses. Yatori shift her attention towards that lady:

"… You are First Lieutenant Miara Gin, what do you wish to ask?"

"During the northern unrest, there should be a warrior named Nirva Gin challenged you to a duel. I would like to know the outcome of that fight."

The lady asked with a tense expression. Yatori looked at the kodachi on her waist, and nodded:

"… I see, is he your family? I thought that might be possible since both of you share the same last name."

"Nevermind that, please tell me the outcome!"

Miara slammed the table with both palms, and after seeing how concerned she was with the answer, Yatori answered directly:

"I won. He challenged an Igsem as a warrior, and fell in battle."

"―Ughh!"

"He was a formidable foe, there won’t be many chances for me to fight someone of his caliber again. I won’t forget the exhilaration I felt during my duel with him."

Yatori answered respectfully. Miara slowly recovered from her shock, then lowered her face with trembling shoulders― the next moment, she kicked over her chair and stood up.

"Don’t lie!"

With a murderous glare in her black eyes, she put her right hand on the hilt of her kodachi. Yatori assumed a fighting stance at the same moment, but before either of them drew their blades, the other two Kioka members restrained their colleague.

"Hold it, Miara! Calm down!""Don’t draw your sword so suddenly!"

Even with the two men restraining her hands, Miara’s agitated emotions continued to simmer. She want to shake them off and slash at her sworn enemy, but Jean held her back desperately and shouted into her ear:

"That’s as good as committing suicide! You know very well that your swordsmanship isn’t as good as your brother!"

His words reigned back Miara's rampaging heart. She took slow and deep breath to calm herself, and relaxed her grip on her hilt. Her two superior officers finally forced her back to her seat.

"… I understand that this is a normal reaction, but being accused of lying still leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

Yatori mumbled as she removed her hand from her hilt. She was no longer tense when she sat down again, and silence fell on the meeting table after the crisis was averted.

At this moment, Sazarf who had not spoken much all this while coughed intentionally, as if to draw attention to his presence.

"… Well, how should I put this? It seems that both sides had chosen the wrong representatives."

Captain Harrah looked at the seething Jean and Miara, then nodded with a troubled face:

"Yes, I agree… Why don't we adjourn and try again next time?"

"Nay! There's no need for that, Harrah!"

"That's what my boss said… I'm fine with that, but if we are to continue, let me be the one to speak. If it devolves into a squabble, we won't make any progress; if Miara draw her blade, then they might be bloodshed."

After hearing this sound reasoning, the white haired officer could only give his silent consent. On the other hand Sazarf was considering whether they should continue another time… But thinking about it from another perspective, this might be a good chance since he got to meet the enemy commander who seemed to have lost his cool. With that in mind, he straightened his posture again:

"Understood, then I will be the main representative and continue the discussion."

"More accurately speaking, we are starting the discussion since we didn't deliberate anything yet… Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Captain Taznyado Harrah of the Kioka army. I already learned your name from our predecessor, so you can skip your introduction."

"Thank you very much. Well then, Captain Harrah, let's get straight to the point… Do you really have no intentions on surrendering?"

"*Nyatt de nyatt!"

"Calm down, Jean. Just chip in for the questions I can't answer… Anyway, that's our answer. You should know without needing to ask. If we are going to surrender, we wouldn't have come in on our balloon."

"That might be so, but do you understand how much of a disadvantage you are in? We have seized Port Nemong and secured our supply lines, and in contrast, your forces are isolated and cut off. Continuing this fight won't do any good for all of us."

"We are surprised by Lady Elulufay's defeat… But we can still manage, so you don't need to worry."

Captain Harrah answered with a confident smile. Sazarf frowned at his counterpart's unfazed attitude. Sazarf thinks he was bluffing, but his attitude seemed too relaxed. Sazarf had to assume that his opponent was confident of victory.

"… Didn't you guys just rushed here on your own?"

As the Major was thinking about what to say next, the dark haired youth blurt out this line. With the three Kioka members looking at him, Ikuta continued speaking with his palm propping up his head:

"I don't know what you are planning, but this base has been surrounded by the Imperial forces. I don't think the Kioka high command will make the dangerous decision of dumping in high

ranking officers without any escorts. At least I won’t make such a risky move, since getting useful officers killed for nothing is stupid."

"And you don’t think this is a sign of confidence? That might be true for a normal commander, but our commander is the [General of Insomniatic Brilliance]. Saving an isolated unit surrounded by the enemy… It is only natural that high command has high expectations of him, since he can pull this off easily."

"If that is true, then I can only offer my sympathy on how hard a life he has… But I still think the Kioka army is a bunch of optimists. So I will make a negative deduction, and decide that this situation is the result of the three of you acting on your own accord."

The corner of Jean’s eye twitch, and the youth continued his monologue while he was perceiving that reaction:

"If I had to categorize, your high command’s tactical decision would be closer to Major Sazarf’s judgement, right? Instead of ordering the defence of the Hioredo ore mines at all cost, they probably instructed you to [consider the option of abandoning the base] the moment Port Nemong fell, correct? That judgement makes more sense. Even if this becomes a battle of attrition, when your reinforcement arrives, it will just turn into an all out battle for the ore mines that involves tens of thousand of soldiers from both sides─ At this moment in time, I don’t think Kioka wants to escalate the war to such a grand scale."

Captain Harrah maintained a poker face as he listened to Ikuta. Ikuta realized that it would take a lot of effort to break his expression, and changed tack:

"… By the way, there is something bothering me. Kioka has been very passive for this war. If you have caught wind of our invasion, then the defences both at sea and on land are inadequate. I can only guess that your intel network had failed…"

This was just a diversion to change topic, but the dark haired youth was also curious about this. Given the high position of the Phantom that infiltrated the navy, it seemed strange that he didn't relay the intel to his allies before the imperial launched their campaign. Did his limited number of pigeons fail to return to their nest, or did he lack other means of communication… This could also be the result of the imperial anti-espionage strategy working as intended, but the whole thing still felt off.

"… In any case, I will continue with my assumption that you three came on your own accord. Hence, the question will be:[will reinforcement really come]? How much support will your allies provide you, given that you did this without consulting them?"

Captain Harrah had a faint smile on his lips, as if he was mocking Ikuta's futile probing attempts.

"Reinforcement will come, First Lieutenant Ikuta Solork, you have already given the reason. It is common sense for anyone to do so since letting [useful officers killed for nothing is stupid]."

"Indeed, given how that white pretty boy rose to the rank of Colonel in the short time after the northern unrest, it is obvious that Kioka thinks highly of him. Like you said, reinforcement will come to save him. And he is trying to emphasize that point by showing up in this meeting, right?"

Ikuta shrugged as he sounded his agreement. But the next moment, his eyes turned sharp:

"However, that's the main issue here. If the goal isn't to [defend the ore mines], then the scale of the reinforcements will be different. It's hard to justify mobilizing an army of ten thousand just for the sake of rescuing you."

"You are free to think whatever you want, First Lieutenant Solork. But isn't your deduction too optimistic?"

"Right back at you. Acting on your own without regards to the tactical situation, and end up waiting for your allies who are worried to rescue you with a huge army— that is already beyond optimism, and is just being delusional."

After retorting sarcastically to that snide remark, Ikuta finally stopped talking. Harrah observed Jean who ready to counter, and sighed.

"… Your member shooting his mouth off is pushing my boss to the brink of an outburst. Major Sazarf, aren't you the main representative?"

"Huh—? Ah… sorry."

"Am I stealing the spotlight? I will leave the rest to the Major then."

Ikuta wasn't fixated on the task, and just dump it onto his superior. Sazarf organized the information in his mind frantically:

"…Erm～ how should I put this? Simply put, you aren't here as part of the grand Kioka strategy, you have decided to defend the Hioredo ore mines on your own for some reasons. The reinforcement coming to get you isn't too large… that's what we established just now, correct?"

"That's just the rambling of that one guy, you are free to believe him if you wish."

"There is value in considering his theory as one possibility— and if he is right, then it begs a question. Is there a reason for you to defend the Hioredo ore mines at the expense of going against the Kioka grand strategy?"

Major looked at the trio with his head tilted.

There is no way of answering a question built on a wrong assumption

— they remained silent to stress this point. However, the dark haired youth broke this silence:

"… Their comrades who had been surrounded are calling for aid. I think that is sufficient reason… for that hero to act recklessly."

Ikuta declared towards the white haired officer. Ikuta's words that seemed to imply he had seen through Jean made the white haired officer got up crudely from his chair, as if he could no longer stand being admonished one sidedly and was prepared to retaliate…

"Alright, that's the end of the meeting."

However, Captain Harrah firm words stopped the young hero from getting out of control. Ikuta clicked his tongue. The big sized soldier who had accumulated years of experience stepped on the brakes at the right moment.

"So, what's the conclusion? What would be an adequate estimate of the enemy's reinforcement?"

On the way back to their base, Sazarf asked his two subordinates. The dark haired youth shook his head:

"No one can tell what the scale might be. That white pretty boy was probably trying hard to raise the numbers, and the enemy high command is probably still troubled over this. I dismissed the notion completely, but there is still a possibility that they had orders to [defend the mines at all cost]."

Ikuta refused to make a clear conclusion, and the vermillion haired girl beside him nodded in agreement.

"We can make negative deductions, but the only thing we can be sure of, is that the [General of Insomniatic Brilliance] came here for the sake of protecting the Hioredo ore mines… By the way, how certain are you that they did that on their own accord, Ikuta?"

"Well～ I think it is very possible… It will be different if they came with a company of air force troopers, but a Colonel rushing over with just a couple of adjutants is clearly abnormal. They either didn't have the time to muster their troops, or this action wasn't sanctioned by high command in the first place. In either case, they came here in a rush, and if the latter is true, then they are risking their lives as a means of convincing their high command."

"That's the part I don't get. Why is the [General of Insomniatic Brilliance] acting so recklessly? Is he adamant on defending the Hioredo ore mines, or is he just confident that he can pull it off?"

"I think it's both, and that guy feels that he has the obligation of defending that mine. This is a common train of thought shared by people that are called heroes."

Ikuta said condescendingly. During this short pause in their conversation, Warrant Officer Lucanti beside them muttered depressedly:

"I can't follow this conversation at all…"

"Don't worry, I'm not expecting you to give your opinion on this, Warrant Officer Lucanti. Just watch from the side and learn."

"My head is getting hot…"

"It's a fever from over exerting your brain. Take care of yourself and rest adequately."

Sazarf dismissed the girl and continue to think. A few minutes later, Ikuta clapped his hands as if he was signalling they should start over:

"There's no meaning in building assumptions on top of assumptions, so let's go back to the basics. We need to find a way to deal with the enemy holing up in the ore mines."

"Yes, that's true. How about inviting those three to a banquet?"

"If I am in their shoes, I will definitely not attend─ jokes aside, I thought of a plan. It might not be a perfect plan, but it matches my style. Specifically─"

"We can't let our guard down in front of that kid, he saw right through our situation."

Inside the large pit dug in the mountain, at the very center of the Kioka base camp. Inside the headquarters that was dim because all the windows and doors were closed, Captain Harrah leaned his big body on the wall and grunted:

"He even knows that we are acting on our own accord, that's impressive. We let Jean attend the meeting in order to make the Imperials overestimate how much Kioka values the Hioredo ore mines, but it had the opposite effect─ alright then, what should we do now?"

He sighed, and a few seconds later, the white haired officer seated further inside the room said:

"… Sorry, I messed up. I was careless."

"No, I'm the one at fault… I did something so unsightly before the enemy."

Miara who was beside Jean bit her lips hard. Captain Harrah looked at his two young soldier reflecting on their actions, and said with a nod:

"As long as you understand. Both of you are fine soldiers, but you are still young, so it's only natural that you will act rashly from time to time. That's the reason I'm here to accompany you."

The oldest of the group told them. After hearing all that, Jean clenched his fists hard:

"Ikuta Solork…! His presence at the meeting is the biggest miscalculation."

"Yes, that’s right. Everyone has a person they are not good at dealing with, but you and him took it to another level. It has been a long time since I saw you trying to keep your cool and failing."

The white haired officer nodded with a sour face. Miara put a hand on his shoulder gently and said:

"…Jean, don’t let the incident during the last battle bother you. You had the initiative during the northern unrest, and the advantage on the strategic level. The only thing he did was to put up some resistance at the very end."

"*Nyatt

… just that last bit of resistance stopped the Alderamin Holy army from successfully seizing the northern territories… More importantly, we lost the [Phantom Unit] led by your brother. That alone is a grave loss for us."

"…… Ughh!"

"Miara, I know how you feel. For the honor of the Gin clan, giving up on avenging your brother is not an option. But that is exactly why I have to give you this order. You must never challenge Yatori Shino Igsem to a duel. No matter how much it might tarnish my name, I can’t lose you."

In order to stress the importance of this order, Jean stared stubbornly at his adjutant who was looking down and gritting her teeth. His intention was relayed a while later, as Miara’s jaw moved up and down a little. Harrah who was watching their interaction smiled:

"You two have finally gotten back to normal─ the time for reflection is over, let’s start the discussion officially. Our enemy is a troublesome fellow, what should we do?"

"We will continue to fight a defensive battle. Since Ikuta Solork is with them, the situation will be the opposite of our previous encounter. Defending against the enemy's assault with our small numbers— didn't he pulled that off when he fought against me? There's no reason I can't do that. No, I have to do it!"

"Hmm… I don't think we shouldn't be overly concerned with our foe, but you are right. Before reinforcements arrive, we have to stave the enemy off. We have to bring our allies home safely, and avoid shifting the national boundary further to the east— More importantly, this is for the sake of Kioka's future."

"*Yah

, I know we have diverged from the high command's grand strategy, but if I can defend this place, we can save this base. Since that is clear to me, I have the obligation to act according to my theory. Because on that day when I lost everything, I already swore an oath to the people who will never return— I won't let a life I can save slip away again."

The "General of Insomniatic Brilliance" said softly as if he was warning himself, then stood up and looked out the window with an intense gaze.

"There is only one thing that I'm sure will happen next. I don't have any basis for saying this— but that guy will definitely play a hand that I will find extremely loathsome."

"Insignificant."

The deep voice echoed through the entire tent. Major General Saba reacted in his usual way towards the idea Sazarf raised on behalf of Ikuta.

"You really think this is an adequate plan? One wrong move— No, even without making any mistakes, this will still benefit the enemy.

Assuming that it somehow succeeds, we will still be questioned after the fact. If it fails, even I will be branded as a traitor."

Major General Saba said solemnly to the three subordinates standing before him. The dark haired youth listened alongside Yatori and Sazarf, but his face was strangely calm.

"Erm… I see, but since we will be depleting a part of the enemy's resources, so in that sense, this is a good plan…"

"Shallow. Anyone can propose impractical empty talk."

Sazarf was dumbstruck after getting shot down so firmly. It seems that the proposal would be rejected— Sazarf looked helplessly to either side of him to express that view, but Ikuta shook his head.

"You are mistaken, Major— Everything Major General Saba has said so far is just his opening remarks!"

The youth declared loudly, as if this was an indisputable truth. Sazarf opened his eyes wide, while Major General Saba frowned with a face of doubt. Only Yatori was smiling wryly.

"It is only natural for there to be an opposing opinion towards any proposals. After all, a perfect plan isn't something that can be thought up so easily. Major General Saba is testing how strongly we felt about our idea. How far have we thought about it? How well can we handle any opposition? After evaluating us, he will then demand us to submit a higher quality proposal. Please understand the General's intention."

Ikuta said with a glib tongue as he took a step towards the commander-in-chief. No matter how many times he saw it, Sazarf couldn't help being impressed by Ikuta's audacity.

"Since we have gotten a stern rebuttal, going by the rules, we have to retract our proposal and polish it further. However, I would like to seek permission to skip this step. After all, a troublesome guy had

butted in to act as the enemy commander, so I want to save as much time as possible."

"… I already heard about you, but you are really a cunning linguist. Are you trying to convince me with your glib tongue?"

"Convince… That's not really it. If I have to categorize this, what I'm doing is conning you."

The youth said with a cheerful smile. Even though the youth was acting overly familiar, the Major General Saba still stubbornly refuse:

"Insignificant, that isn't possible."

"That's not true. In the past, there is at least one person who managed to do that, right?"

Ikuta shook his head and corrected the Major General's words. The Major General stiffened his lips.

"… What are you trying to say?"

"Like I said, I'm just trying to do something interesting in this meaningless war. And isn't our proposal really amusing? Not only will we get to see the stupefied face of our enemies, we can also work towards a victory with minimal bloodshed if it works… Yes, we might get questioned after the fact, but if we think about it from a different perspective, isn't this a wondrous thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Because [achieving results even if you have to resort to unorthodox means] is the style that suits you the most, Major General Kubalha Saba of the [Twin Jewels of the Sun]."

The youth made it clear that he meant well when he said that. The Major General was completely caught off guard. His nostalgic nickname that came suddenly broke through his statue like poker face.

"… You are bringing up an ancient tag."

"That's right, why don't you use this chance to clear away the dust, and wear it on your chest? You can add this behind the name tag— [self preservation isn't your style at all]."

The moment Ikuta said that— a "Ha" escaped from Major General Saba, even though he had never shown any goodwill to anyone so far. It wasn't loud, but it sounded sincerely cheerful.

"I see, so this is the con you are referring to—"

Major General Saba who finally understood the meaning behind these words look at his opponent with a smile, and Ikuta smiled back. The two soldiers with a large gulf in both rank and age had grown unexpectedly close after their short exchange.

"……Ikuta Solork, huh?"

Major General Saba repeated this name. His gaze seemed to be resting on a figure standing behind that youth— a short moment later, the commander-in-chief returned his eyes to the trio before him and said:

"Polish your proposal into an executable plan and submit it again— I will decide whether I want to be tricked after hearing it."

In the afternoon three days later, the trouble Jean was expecting was finally here.

"C-Colonel, a report!"

When the messenger barged into the headquarters, the white haired officer had braced himself for bad news. However, the report he heard was the opposite.

"A platoon of allied soldiers has reached our base, and is requesting to link up with us! They seemed to be the unit to our west that engaged the imperial army earlier!"

"─ What did you say?"

Jean got up from his chair with a stiff face. His comrade that was defeated had managed to escape from the enemy─ on the surface, this was definitely good news. However, it was too good to be true.

"Our base camp is completely surrounded, there is no gaps for our allies to sneak through. Is that unit the enemy disguised as friendly forces?"

"No, they are definitely our allies. There are many soldiers in this base that had retreated here from the west, and they recognize their former comrades there. We have verified the identity of their platoon leader, so it is unlikely that the enemy infiltrated in…"

As this involved their comrades well being, the messenger was flustered when he made his report. Seeing that Jean was unable to decide and fell into deep thought, his female adjutant raised her hand:

"Jean, I will go take a look. We might be able to sort out the details if we interview their platoon leader."

"… *Syah

. Please check for any traps or foul play, Miara. We can let their platoon leader enter the base, and interview him first."

They couldn't be sure if an assassin had infiltrated that group, so it would be dangerous for Jean to go. Miara who took on this task on his behalf saluted and rushed out of the headquarters. The white haired officer watched his adjutant go, and felt a strange sense of unease growing in his heart.

After a short jog up the the bowl shaped camp towards the west, Miara noticed a large group of soldiers gathered near the top of the slope, with a huge familiar figure amongst them. When he noticed her, that figure spoke to her.

"Oh, you are here? A messenger should have gone over, so what are Jean’s thoughts about this?"

Captain Harrah was covered in dirt, probably from patrolling the ditch. Miara shook her head:

"He is very suspicious of this whole situation, but has reserved judgement until I took a look at the situation."

Miara answered as she climbed out the defensive wall made from dirt, and watched the situation on the other side while staying on guard of gunfire. She saw more than 40 Kioka soldiers laying prone with faces filled with worry. Miara asked Harrah who came to her a moment later.

"… I heard the identity of the platoon leader has been verified. Please tell me his name."

"Second Lieutenant Calone Munjiha. That short round faced man who is holding our nation’s flag in front of them."

After hearing that reply, Miara immediately found the subject in question and shouted:

"Second Lieutenant Calone Munjiha! I wish to ask you the specific details, come to us alone!"

The platoon leader quickly climbed up the dirt wall as instructed. The short middle aged soldier stumbled into the camp with the help of a rope Harrah dropped to him. Miara jumped off the dirt wall and spoke to him:

"Welcome to the Hioredo ore mines. Unfortunately, we don’t have time to let you rest, so please brief us quickly. We want to let the soldiers in as soon as possible too."

"Ah… Yes…! But… Erm… Where should I start…"

"You can start in chronological order, after the battle with the Imperial army. What happened, and how did you get here?"

Harrah pressed for details. Second Lieutenant Munjiha sort out his thoughts, and started answering:

"… After receiving reports of the imperial invasion, my unit set off from the base to the defensive fortification in the west to intercept the enemy. However, we were outnumbered, and surrendered without achieving anything of note. My subordinates and I were taken prisoner by the Empire."

"You were taken prisoner…? Then how did you escape them?"

"This is the part that I don't understand, we didn't make any attempts to escape. The imperials took us from the prison camp and left us at the foot of the mountain."

"And you fled here after there?"

"No… Like I said, we didn't escape. The imperial army released us at the foot of the mountain, and we were abandoned in the wild without any explanation. We can't go back to our base in the west, so we set course for the closest allied base, which is here."

Second Lieutenant Munjiha explained as he took out an official letter from a leather folder, and showed it to the two of them:

"We hereby release the Kioka Army Second Lieutenant Calone Munjiha and the 37 soldiers under his charge from the obligation of prison labour"— this content, along with the date, time and stamp were all written on this official letter. A dark gloom hung over Miara and Harrah's faces.

"It's a simplified version, but it's still an official document… There is nothing suspicious about the content. It looks like a legit document that adheres to the laws of war."

"… In other words, the enemy released the prisoners one sidedly? They didn’t ask for anything in return and just hand them over to us?"

"That’s how it is. I am baffled by this too, and can’t offer any explanation either…"

Second Lieutenant Munjiha lowered his head haplessly. With their allies who returned in such a ridiculous manner in front of them, Miara and Harrah could only stare at each other.

"… I understand the enemy’s goal."

After hearing the report from his two subordinate, the "General of Insomniatic Brilliance" showed a bitter expression:

"It is as you presumed, it’s impossible for the enemy to release the prisoners of war without asking for anything in return. This is clearly an offensive act."

"It’s treason, then? Second Lieutenant Munjiha and the others…?"

"*Nyatt

… They are innocent. What Second Lieutenant Munjiha said was probably true, but the situation is more simple and devious. Listen up, Miara— This is just the first batch of many, we will be taking in more released prisoners in the future. The intention of the Imperial army is to increase the load on our food supply and drain our resources."

When they heard that, Miara eyes opened wide and Harrah slapped his forehead in enlightenment:

"… So that’s what they are after! Damn it, now that you mentioned it, this is a blind spot…!"

"This is a rather classic idea, no, it can even be thought of as being outdated. In order to stress out the enemy holing up in a fortification, an army would round up citizens from the nearby towns and villages, and herd them into the enemy base— such unethical methods were

only natural in the wars of the past… However, with the progress of civilization, a set of laws dictating [the basic rules that both sides have to adhere to] for nations at war was drafted. This treaty drawn up by various nations is the [law of war]. According to the treaty, exploiting normal citizens for war is prohibited, and the same applies for prisoners of war. However—"

"—The treaty prohibits the maltreatment of prisoners, but not the release of prisoners… No, strictly speaking [abandoning prisoners without ensuring they have the means to survive] will be classified as maltreatment, but if I remember correctly, that only violates the treaty if the [place of their release is hostile territory to the prisoners]."

"That's right, this place is Kioka territory, and Second Lieutenant Munjiha's platoon did escape into an allied base— damn it! What a clever and infuriating trick. The nature of this scheme is comparable to the inhumane methods of ancient times, but if we check this against the treaty, we can't fault them for anything at all."

Captain Harrah clicked his tongue with a mix of awe and hatred, while Miara shook her head hard:

"No! Since Jean had seen through the enemy, then we can stop them! If accepting the release prisoners will deplete our food faster, then we just have to reject them!"

In response to the simple solution raised up by his deputy, the white haired officer answered curtly with a "Nay."

"… We can't do that, Miara. We have to accept the released prisoners."

"I understand how you feel, but Jean…! There are times when we have to make the harsh decision!"

"*Syah

, I don’t intend to shriek from my duties as the commander. Saving the many by sacrificing the few― that’s what war is about. If I can save a hundred by sacrificing ten people, I won’t hesitate in doing so. Even if the numbers are 49 against 51, I will still choose the same― However, the issue here is different."

Jean continued explaining to Miara who furrowed her brows puzzledly:

"Think about it, why did the soldiers here submit themselves to us, who aren’t their original commanders? That’s because we didn’t abandon them. Because we came to help them when they are surrounded by the enemy, with no regards for our own safety― This first impression is the foundation of their trust in us."

"Ahh…"

"Conversely, when this foundation wavers, our authority to command will crumble. Unlike you two, they don’t have complete faith in me. This is only natural since we met most of the soldiers for the first time a few days ago. Things might be different if they are subordinates that I trained up."

"…B-But! The enemy didn’t violate the war treaty, right? In that case, if we refuse to accept the prisoners, they won’t suffer any harsh treatment! If they surrender to the enemy again, they won’t be attacked…!"

"Yes, you might be right. Hoping the enemy will act in the way we wish is foolish, but it’s true that our opponent this time won’t kill the prisoners after all that… However, even if they won’t do that, they can create such an illusion. For example― when the prisoners are out of our sight, they can use that chance to make the sound of gunshots and screams. Aside from the few of us, the others will think that the prisoners had been massacred."

"What…!"

"Our opponent this time is someone who will do something like that… and if that happens, how will the troops feel as they imagine the scene of their comrades being slaughtered? Unease, sadness, rage and hatred… Will all their negative emotions be directed to the imperial army alone? No, it's not that simple. We will become the subject of hatred and suspicion because we abandoned their comrades that could have been saved."

After making such a conclusion, Jean sighed heavily. Miara couldn't find a response, and kept quiet.

"That guy… Ikuta Solork executed this plan after making that many moves ahead. He had already seen through that we have no choice but to take in our allies. It's not a surprise to me anymore, meeting with him at that conference a few days ago was a mistake. I was the one who gave him this opening."

The white haired officer clenched his right fist and smacked it into his left palm with gritted teeth. He restrained himself with this action as he searched tirelessly for a way to counter this situation.

"… Since they are prisoners, they will be stripped of their weapons. The base don't have excess stock of weapons, and unlike arrows, we don't have the specialized craftsman to make air rifle bullets. Despite the strain on our food supply increasing, our combat potential aren't increasing."

"I can't find anyway we can benefit… I'm breaking out in cold sweat."

"No, there is only one advantage. That guy might think he had seen through our situation─ but things aren't that simple. As you all know, we have concealed our trump card."

Jean said quietly as he looked out the window. Inside the pits exposed to the sky were numerous tunnels dug into the walls. Many soldiers could be seen entering and exiting these tunnels.

"Our fighting strength will remain the same, but the manpower we can tap on has increased. We might not have spare weapons, but there are plenty of shovels left behind by the mine workers─ There's no benefit for us at all?

*Mum

, Harrah, please don't jest. This situation is a boon for us."

"… That's right!"

"Have you stopped breaking out in cold sweat? Then the issue is settled─ Alright, Harrah, go back to your post and continue supervising the digging works. Miara officially take in Second Lieutenant Munjiha's platoon, remember to treat them kindly."

"Yes Sir!"

"*Yah

. I will be counting on you two. Whether we can let Ikuta Solork taste bitter defeat will be dependent on your success."

When they heard the order given to them with a determined tone, Miara and Harrah nodded firmly. They exit through the main door, and the "General of Insomniatic Brilliance" watch them go with eyes filled with trust.

"Ara～ I wonder how long can they last?"

At the same time, the opponent Jean and the others were busy preparing against─ was chewing on grilled chicken claw in a sloppy manner as he observed the enemy with his telescope.

"That's the fourth platoon we sent over… So their food will be depleted by 160 people more people～"

Haro said in awe. Beside Ikuta who was seated on a round stool were the members of the knight order, the Princess, and Sazarf. They

were all eating like he was. There was a wide gulf in tension between on the two sides, even though they share the same battlefield.

"To come up with such a scummy method… just imagining the situation for our enemy gives me goosebumps."

"Hmm hmmp, you can imagine the disgust felt back by the enemy, right? That's the beauty of this, Matthew. That white pretty boy was prepared for an intense trench warfare, but I had enough of that during our naval battle. So this time, I won't let them fight a normal battle!"

"I-It has been a while since I last saw Ik-kun being so energetic…"

"Using such despicable methods suits his personality just fine. His face looks exactly the same as that time when he set that conman up."

Yatori said offhandedly. Sazarf laughed in response, and tore a toast bread apart:

"Well, I don't hate this method. In any case, ending things without a fight is the best results. Neither me nor my men will get hurt, and we can use our free time to enjoy a casual meal. Sigh~ I have no complaints."

"……Major Sazarf, you are becoming more and more like Solork."

Princess Chamille commented suddenly, and Sazarf froze for a few seconds before coughing intentionally:

"T-That's not important! I was surprised by this plan, but what surprised me more was that you managed to convince Major General Saba. As a bystander, it was really shocking. How did things go so smoothly given how bad his temper is?"

"No, I didn't use any special tactic. More accurately speaking, I believe in Major General Saba right from the start. Since I know he is someone who will react when I knock, I just need to make sure I knock on the right spot."

"That’s what I don’t understand. No matter how I look at it, you have obviously gotten a good hold on Major General Saba’s character. I tried for a month and failed, so what’s going on here?"

Sazarf pressed for an answer. At this moment, Yatori interjectted nonchalantly:

"Major, despite how withdrawn Major General Saba may seem, in the past, he was famous and had the nickname [Twin Jewels of the Sun]. The late Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan and him shared this nickname while they were serving together under a certain general in the past. Given his reputation, this is more than enough reason to place our trust in him."

"I think I have heard of that before… But even then, all that happened before you were born, correct?"

Sazarf replied with an akward smile, and decided to stop pursuing the matter.

"Really now… I thought we had gotten close after going through the war and so many incidents. Seems like there are still many things I don’t really know."

Ikuta and Yatori didn’t respond, and they chewed on their dried papaya to end their meal. Everyone finished their food soon after, and returned to their stations.

"We are done with our meal, so let’s go back to our subordinates… To be honest, this is really boring. On top of that, we are part of the reserves, and won’t have much change in engaging the enemy."

"Isn’t that just fine, my dear Matthew? You are overworked for the naval battle earlier, so you can take a well deserved break. If you push yourself after coming here, then you will be overworking."

"It’s normal for soldiers to strive for achievements, right? I don’t plan to be stingy with my efforts."

"No, you are wrong. For the operations of an organization, the adequate allocation of work and risk is very important. In order for an organization to run smoothly, overworking only a few select staff shouldn't be viewed as the norm. This applies outside the military too, and is very important. Please keep that in mind, Matthew."

Ikuta emphasized again. His tone was normal, but there was a serious light in his dark eyes. The slightly pudgey youth noticed that, and repeated what he just heard in his head. He couldn't digest everything just yet, but still nodded for now, deciding to think about it thoroughly later.

After Matthew left, Torway, Haro and Sazarf all returned to their post. The rowdy meal ended, leaving only Ikuta, Yatori and Princess Chamille behind.

"……"

At this moment, the Princess fidgeted flusteredly. She remembered that scene which happened on the "Yellow Dragon" before the battle, so the three of them being together made her feel uneasy. She got up from her seat, and tried to leave nonchalantly─ but coincidentally, a voice came from behind her.

"Your Highness, please wait. There's some dirt on your hair. Pardon my insolence, but please allow me to clean it for you. Let's head to the tent over there."

"Hmm…? N-No need. I can clean my hair by myself."

"But it's a hassle to clean the part behind your head, right? If your beautiful hair is damaged, then not just me, all the soldiers will be pained by this. This is bad for the wellbeing of your hair, so I hope you─"

The vermillion haired girl said in a logical manner that clearly showed her sincere concern in an effort to convince Princess Chamille… Yatori or Haro taking the initiative to request to take care

of the Princess was very common. And to the Princess, this was definitely not something that would irked her.

"… Ugh!"

Before getting to know the members of the knight order, there wasn’t anyone who would comb her hair with such love and tenderness. Most of the people around either feared her, or was curious. In rare cases, they were filled with hatred or pity— so for the Princess, Yatori and Haro whom she met by chance were the only two person of the same gender that she could open her heart to.

— That should be so, but why…

The heart of the girl fell into conflicted emotions of admiration and jealousy… Why was this display of kindness so painful for her? Why was the dark emotions in her heart tumbling and overwhelming her gratitude and joy—!

"…? What’s the matter, Your Highness—"

Smack! A crisp sound echoed out— when the Princess realized it, she had slapped away Yatori’s hand with all her might:

"I-I don’t wanna!"

The girl yelled angrily, her voice turned shrilled from anger. The rejected Yatori froze on the spot.

"Know your place, Yatori Shino Igsem! You are not my kin or servant! There’s no reason for you to tend to me at all! B-But you ignore my wishes and speak to me over familiarly…! Do you think of yourself as my mother or older sister!"

When the damn broke, even the Princess couldn’t stop it. The emotion that had built up in her heart gushed out violently into sharp words that stabbed at Yatori mercilessly.

For the next few minutes, even the Princess herself wasn’t sure what she was raving about. When she came to, she found the red haired knight kneeling on one knee with her head bowed, as she was standing stiffly with ragged breath. She wasn’t fazed by the muddy ground beneath her.

"― My apologies, Princess Chamille. I have been acting arrogantly and spoken out of line. I will reflect on your words and not fail in my chivalry as a knight again."

Yatori didn’t give any reason or explanation, and gave a perfect apology as a knight. After seeing this splendid response, the Princess realized in horror what a foolish thing she had done.

"… Ahh… Ahh…"

You are not my kin or servant! There’s no reason for you to tend to me at all!

― It was correct for a royal to admonish her vassals with this rationale. However, this wasn’t something Chamille should say to Yatori.

The Princess used the absolute authority of her position to stample over the relationship she had nurtured with the vermillion haired girl. Because of her careless words, their hearts that had grown closer over all this time was reverted to that of a Lord and her knight.

"Ahh… Ughh!"

And the result was Yatori’s figure kneeling in the mud. The one who forced her to do so was none other then the Princess herself. Realizing the despair and the wrong she had wrought, Princess Chamille’s reason shattered. She ran off at full speed and fled the scene.

"Your Highness……!"

Yatori stood up and wanted to give chase, but someone grabbed her shoulder from behind. She looked back and found the dark haired youth shaking his head.

"… We should give her some time. If you chase right after her, you will just force her to a corner."

The vermillion haired girl couldn't refute this opinion, and stopped her feet with feelings of resigned anxiety. Ikuta squat down before her and brushed off the mud staining her knee. Yatori accepted his help as she closed her eyes to reflect on her own incompetence.

"She asked if I thought of myself as her mother or older sister… That really shook me."

"……"

"Right now, I'm serving Her Highness as a knight. But when I think of her as a normal girl, I understood that compared to the loyalty as a vassal, what she needed more as a young girl is familial kindness… That was probably why I did those things unconsciously."

"You aren't wrong. To the Princess, everyone in the knight order is like an older sibling to her. I think that is the responsibility of someone older accompanying their young charges."

"That's true… But I couldn't push myself to do so. I will always think of my position as a knight and Her Highness' status as a royal, and how she is my mistress. So even though I had an inkling of what might happen, I could only apologize in my position as a knight."

Yatori hung her head with a self mocking face that was rarely seen on her:

"… If we are true sisters… No, even if we are just friends, we should have fought just now. We will slowly adjust the sense of distance between us through a series of small squabbles… I think that is more healthy for humans."

"You don’t need to be bound by the standards of what is [normal], after all, you just have to face the Princess within your own limits. Not as a nameless knight, but as an older sister."

"Can I really do it… I am protecting the Third Princess of the Empire as a knight, but not the girl named Chamille… Recently, I have been thinking about that a lot."

After dusting off most of the mud, the dark haired youth stood up without saying anything. Yatori who was looking in the direction the Princess ran off in finally turned her gaze onto Ikuta.

"—Ikuta, from the very start, you are the closest to Princess Chamille… She had told you many things that she couldn’t tell me, correct?"

"……"

"I don’t have any basis for this, but I sense that Her Highness is hiding a grave secret. I can’t even imagine what its content might be, but I know it isn’t a peaceful matter. It seems that you are undecided about it too."

"… Ah～ forget it, I never thought I can hide it from you in the first place."

Ikuta said with a wry smile, and continued with a serious face:

"To be blunt, the Princess was raised in a twisted way. So up until now, she still wants to move towards a fruitless goal… As for me, I just can’t leave her alone."

"It’s the responsibility of being the older one… So, how’s the situation? Have you figured a way out?"

When he heard this question, Ikuta’s face turned even more serious:

"To be honest, it’s very difficult. The Princess’ heart has been twisted in a place deeper than I expected. She is surprisingly fixated

on her goal towards a destructive end, so much that I suspect that she was nurtured this way with malicious intent… On top of that, I'm not qualified at all to guide the younger ones, so I concluded that I can't do this on my own."

"You seem to be stuck in a deeper rut than I imagined— in that case, what are your plans?"

Under Yatori's watchful eyes, Ikuta hesitated for a moment before showing a bashful smile.

"Hmm, about that… You told me something on the [Yellow Dragon], correct? I think I can use your words to form the basis of my answer."

The youth scratched his head with a hand as he replied. His unexpected response made the girl open her eyes wide in surprise.

"I can't save the Princess alone, and you can't protect the girl named Chamille by yourself. So in conclusion— there's two of us here."

Ikuta added. A few seconds later, the vermillion haired girl smiled gently:

"… Maybe Her Highness will yell at us to know our place, and we will get scolded together."

"Yes, if she ask if you think you are her mother or older sister, I will say I'm like her father or elder brother."

"That will make her more mad, and might blow up the matter."

"Isn't that what we want? It will be great if we are close enough to fight like that."

The youth said after turning around, then turned back to face Yatori again:

"… It’s the same for that [grave secret]. In the near future, I will tell you all about it, I promise. So can you wait a while longer?"

Ikuta looked at her eyes and said clearly. Yatori gave a slight nod. That topic was concluded with that gesture─ since Ikuta promised to tell her one day, the girl will believe him and wait.

"… Oh, on another note, I have something to discuss with you."

The silence didn’t last long. Ikuta switched topics nonchalantly:

"This is a copy I made of the ore mines map I borrowed from headquarters. When I compared it to another map, there is some parts that that bothered me. There’s a tunnel that leads to the north─"

"Sorry to interrupt!"

While the two of them were studying the map Ikuta took out, three imperial soldiers suddenly interrupted them. They were Company grade officers, but their faces didn’t look familiar. After a sloppy salute, they went straight to the point.

"We have an urgent message for First Lieutenant Yatori Shino Igsem. As per our orders, the contents are for your eyes only. Could you follow us for a moment?"

"Only for me…? I have no idea what this is about, but very well, let’s go under the shade of that tree."

Yatori stopped the conversation and followed the officers to a spot some distance away. The youth who was left alone was weirded out by this development when he heard Suya shouting: "OC!" Ikuta didn’t linger over this matter and left the place too.

The five members of the knight order only reconvened at night.

In the base to the south of the ore mines, a tent had been set up for them to use as a gathering place. In the space lit up by Kusu’s lantern

light, Ikuta, Matthew, Torway and Haro were waiting for Yatori and the Princess to come back.

"After seven batches, that’s about 300 men? The Kioka army in the mountain took in all the prisoners we released. They must have figured out our goal by now…"

"That white pretty boy must have known since the first batch. However, they don’t have any choice but to take in the released prisoners. If they lose the trust and morale of their men, no one will cooperate with him to fight this hopeless battle."

Ikuta answered Torway with his eyes on the map detailing the inside of the ore mines. Opposite him, Haro was working hard at cleaning the mud stain on her shirt and said:

"Even the [General of Insomniatic Brilliance] will get troubled if their food runs out… What will they do then?"

"That’s the issue here. If they won’t surrender, they will have to set up a new supply line before their rations run out, which will be a difficult problem. Even if their reinforcement really comes, they will still need to break through our encirclement to deliver the supply into the mountain. The soldiers will definitely starve before they can accomplish that."

"I have been thinking about that too. Will the enemy deliver the supplies with balloons? If they just need to air drop the supplies in, it can be done by flying at an altitude higher than the range of the Anti Material Air Rifle, correct?"

"Considering the capacity of one balloon, that’s not practical at all. Even if they send out one company of air force troopers, we can also despatch our cavalry and chase them to their landing zone. This is different from the situation with Lieutenant General Rikan, who can’t attack the enemy’s territory."

"So you aren't that worried about their air force, Ik-kun. From the looks of it, your concern is in the opposite direction… which is underground?"

The jade eyed youth shift his gaze onto the table as he speaks. Ikuta nodded:

"That's right. Tunnels and ore mines comes as a package, and in case of emergencies and their basecamp being surrounded, digging an escape tunnel had been used since ancient times. Assuming that thing exist, it can be used as a supply line too."

"What I want to ask is, is that assumption practical? A really long tunnel will be needed to pass under our encirclement, and can't be done in a matter of days."

"It's not a matter of days, Matthew. This map is from the times when the Empire controlled the ore mines. Back then, the escape tunnel was already half completed. After all, the Empire was also worried about being surrounded by the enemy. There's no telling whether the Kioka had continued with the excavation works, correct?"

Matthew took the map and groaned as he stared at it. Ikuta shifted his gaze onto another map─ the terrain around the Hioredo ore mines.

"About 700m to the north of the ore mines is a vast jungle… If their tunnel reaches there, they can avoid being detected by the enemy encircling the ore mines, and establish contact with the outside. That's the possibility I'm wary of. In any case, I want to confirm if this tunnel exist."

"How do you plan to find out? You can't do a comb of the entire jungle, or are you thinking of listening with your ears to the ground at suspicious spots?"

"When digging such a long tunnel, the suitability of the ground is very important. The earth around this place is not firm by any standards, so if─"

Footsteps from outside the tent stopped the discussion that was heating up. After pulling the tent's entrance open, a vermillion haired girl entered. The four of them greeted their comrade with their gaze.

"Welcome back, Yatori-san. You are late tonight, did something happened?"

Haro stopped scrubbing at the stains and asked Yatori gently. However, in contrast to her, Yatori's face was very stiff. Torway noticed that:

"What happened, Yatori-san?"

"… Yes. My company have received orders to return to the Empire."

Yatori said monotonously, and her answered made the four of them opened their eyes wide:

"Return to the Empire… Huh? So you are the only one who has to return? We have not finished our objectives of taking the ore mines, so… what's going on here?"

Matthew raised an obvious question. The other three were wondering the same thing, but the vermillion haired girl didn't answer. Seeing her abnormal reaction, Ikuta thought briefly for a moment, then tapped on the table rhythmically with his fingers.

─ What's going on?

By converting the Kioka light signal code into sound, Ikuta tried to ask her in secret. Yatori realized what he was doing, pondered for a moment, then approached the table and tapped a reply with her fingers.

─ I can't say anything.

The youth felt his body temperature drop at this curt reply─ she can't say anything. Being pulled out of the frontlines was obviously

an abnormal situation, but Yatori Shino Igsem still insist that she couldn’t explain the situation to Ikuta Solork.

"… Okay, I understand."

Only in such a situation would silence be a fearsome means of debating. Since he couldn’t get an answer, Ikuta could only work backwards to solve the question. In other words─ Something more terrible than what she could express in words had happened.

"When will you leave?"

Ikuta asked as he stood up. Yatori answered simply:

"I have to leave by tonight, about two hours later."

Being told that they didn’t have much buffer time turned Matthew and the others speechless. But Ikuta just nod and walked outside.

"… I will be out for a while. Drop by here again in an hour."

The dark haired youth said as he walk pass Yatori, and left the tent with brisk steps… After he left, the other companions who didn’t grasp the situation looked at Yatori who was standing there in silence. Her fists were clenched tightly.

After leaving his comrades, Ikuta headed straight for the headquarters main tent. It was impossible that the commander-in-chief didn’t know that Yatori would be leaving the frontlines with the company under her command.

"Pardon my intrusion."

He had already passed through the entrance when he said that, acting before he could get a response. More than ten high ranking officers and Major General Saba was in the large tent, and they cast gazes of bafflement and admonishment at the young First Lieutenant who had barged in. Major Sazarf and Major Melza were also present, but the ones who caught Ikuta’s attention weren’t them. His dark eyes

immediately found the three Company grade officers he saw in the afternoon.

"W-What─ Uwah!"

Ikuta approached the trio who were speaking with Major General Saba, grabbed one of them by the shoulder and pulled them over:

"What happened?"

This was different from the youth's usual style of doing things as he demanded for an answer in a forward manner. The officer averted his gaze because of his intimidating demeanour, refusing to answer. Ikuta continue holding onto him as he turned his eyes to the side:

"Major General Saba, regarding the matter of First Lieutenant Yatori Shino withdrawing from the frontlines, what have they told you?"

The youth disregarded any protocol and asked the commander-in-chief who was much older than him. The high ranking officers all stared with their eyes wide open from outrage, but Major General Saba didn't seem to mind and answered plainly:

"I have only learned that it is a [strategic redeployment of grave importance]."

"There's no further explanation? Then, who signed the orders?"

"Field Marshal Igsem."

"M-Major General! He's a mere Lieutenant, how can you…"

One of the officers who brought this problem here protested, but the Major General glared at him.

"…Insignificant. I'm very concerned by the abnormality of this situation too. We will be getting ready to attack the enemy's base soon, and this order to withdraw 2,000 troops came out of the blue;

and the explanation is as good as nothing. Even if a mere Lieutenant acted slightly out of line from the corner of my eyes, it is trivial compared to the seriousness of this matter."

Major General answered in a cold and condescending tone. It seems that the commander-in-chief had given his consent to Ikuta’s brusque actions─

I will ignore it even if you act a little out of line, interrogate those guys as much as you want.

The youth understood what the general was implying, and nodded slightly:

"You mentioned 2,000 troops? In that case, Yatori’s unit isn’t the only one that had been pulled out… Aside from Yatori, can you list the full name of all the recalled officers with the rank of First Lieutenant and above?"

"Very well. Major Nudakka Megu, Captain Abunriku Yodoriko, Captain Maruji Niruhisuna, Captain Poren Suhiku, First Lieutenant Jigu Daisosu─"

Major General Saba read out the names listed on the written orders fluently. After listening to the full list, Ikuta matched these names with the information in his memory─ it didn’t take long for him to find what they have in common:

"─ They are all officers from the Igsem faction? And the ones who are more active too."

When he heard that, the officer Ikuta was grabbing twitched the corner of his lips. Having confirmed that he was on the mark, Ikuta pressed on:

"Yatori didn’t tell me anything about why she had been recalled. It’s rare for us to hide anything from each other. Private matters aside, since we are assigned to the same mission and working under the

same officer, it is only natural for us to share our intel─ since this is obviously a military matter, why did she say she can't share it with me?"

"… Ughh…"

"The thing that can seal her lips─ is usually her position as a member of the Igsem house. And that matches the situation where only the officers from the Igsem faction had been recalled… Hence, I can deduce with almost perfect confidence at this point in time that something serious had happened in the Empire, and it involved the Igsem faction."

Enough! Don't say anymore!

That officer pleaded desperately with his eyes, but Ikuta ignored him. He said the decisive phrase aloud:

"Let's start by checking the worst scenario─ a coup?"

In that instant, the color drained from that officer's face. The youth saw from close range that the first shot fired had regrettably hit the mark. The chill he felt spread to everyone in the tent.

"… And the coup is serious enough to force Field Marshal Igsem to recall the forces that are [definitely on his side] back to the empire. There are very few who can pull this off… Using the simple process of elimination, the mastermind is General Remeon."

"N-No!"

Only now did that officer refuted him for the first time. However, his lips were trembling too much for anyone to believe him. Ikuta leaned in closer, and glared at him with their noses almost touching:

"Hey, if you want to deny it, at least give us a reason. Do you have any other excuses that make sense? I can't think of any. This army is on a campaign by imperial edict, but 2,000 officers and men from the

Igsem faction had been suddenly recalled without any reason— aside from a coup, is there any other reason?"

"Ugh… Ugh…!"

"You don't have one? That's because Field Marshal Igsem understood that any reason he fabricates will draw suspicion, that's why he is forcing it through with the excuse of [strategic redeployment of grave importance], correct?"

After staring at each other for a while, the officer's lips remained tightly sealed. He was like a turtle hiding in his shell, using his silence as the best means of defence. Ikuta treated this silence to confirm his deduction, and turned to Major General Saba:

"This is the truth, Major General. Officers from the Igsem faction had been recalled suddenly to deal with the coup in the empire, so we can conclude that the Imperial army is going to split into two factions."

"……"

"I don't think anyone here meets this condition, but please be wary of high ranking officers from the Remeon faction, they might attempt to seize command authority from you… but that's unlikely. During the planning phase of the Hioredo ore mines campaign, General Remeon had already included soldiers who might get in the way of his coup. The proof is that including you, all the officers present are more passive about factions."

Ikuta surveyed the room where the soldiers were standing in a daze, decided that his job was done, and ran out of the tent.

"Hey! First Lieutenant Ikuta! Where are you going…!"

Ikuta didn't respond to Sazarf's panicking voice, and disappeared into the night.

Inside the tent that blocked out everything in the world except for the dim light of the setting sun shining through the translucent curtains. The Princess was writhing in her bed from guilt and self loathing, curled up into a ball with a blanket around her.

After saying those awful things to Yatori and running away, she had no choice other then hiding in this personal space of hers. The Princess was too afraid to visit the water supply station a few metres outside, much less meet the members of the Knight Order.

She felt as if every tree, grain of sand, and all other things in the world were reproaching her. These voices of admonishment kept bombarding her mind, wearing away her mental fortitude from the inside. If she was subjected to external attack, she would crumble away without any resistance― She was convinced of that, so her only option was to lock herself away.

"Pardon my intrusion, is Princess Chamille in?"

Her heart jolted when the Princess heard the voice she feared the most coming from outside. The aura of the vermillion haired girl standing proudly with her chest held high could even be felt inside the tent.

"My apologies, First Lieutenant Yatori Shino. Her Highness doesn’t wish to meet anyone at the moment."

The guard answered as instructed by the Princess. The girl listened carefully, and could feel someone nodding slightly. Yatori’s voice then rang out again:

"I see, this might be rude, but allow me to report directly here― I have received orders from the Empire to withdraw, and will return with my unit back to the Empire. It is almost time for me to go, so I came to report to you urgently."

The Princess held her breath― return to the Empire? In this situation, and only Yatori? But why?

"The other members of the Knight Order will stay behind, so please take care of your safety and stick together with them as much as possible."

At this point, Yatori stopped and fell silent. It felt like she was waiting for a reply, and searching for more heartfelt words… However, the Princess held onto to her peace stubbornly, and Yatori seemed to noticed that from outside the tent. So Yatori didn't try to continue the conversation, and said her farewell:

"Well then, I will take my leave― Princess Chamille, please take care."

After saying what sounded like a prayer, the movement of her turning could be felt inside the tent. Realizing that her footsteps were getting further, the Princess started shivering. Spurred by her strong sense of anxiety, she felt the urge to charge out of the tent and chase her― but in the end, the girl couldn't move.

"―Ah―"

She waited until the sense of movement was completely gone. In the dim tent without any sense of salvation, the girl was left alone once more.

After bidding the Princess goodbye, Yatori headed to the Knight Order's tent. She didn't even need to go in as her four comrades were standing at the entrance with serious faces. Their expression were no longer baffled, so Yatori knew that they already learned the truth.

"Y-Yatori-san…""What are you going to do?"

Haro and Matthew asked stiffly. Yatori stopped at a distance further than usual from her friends, and the reason to keep her lips tightly sealed was gone.

"I can't tell since I haven't grasp the whole situation yet… But since something that upset the order of the military had happened, I

have to deal with it seriously as a member of house Igsem. No matter who my opponent might be."

After hearing her words that had a hint of harshness, Torway's face contorted in pain:

"My father… had he really done such a thing…?"

"I know you had not been told anything. After all, with your personality, you won't be able to hide it if you knew about it ahead of time… General Remeon probably excluded his youngest son from the plan intentionally."

Yatori answered with confidence… This youth was too gentle, and would definitely be hesitant to fire upon his old comrades because of the coup. His father must know that very well.

"To be frank, that's a boon for me. After all, your sniping unit will be my biggest threat as an enemy."

"What—"

The jade eyed youth was dumbstruck. Yatori's words had already regarded Torway as one of the enemy forces, and even simulated a battle between them.

"No, not just Torway… It's fine for you to stay here obediently, but if you don't plan to do so, then Matthew and Haro has to make their position clear too. Because taking action in this situation means you have to choose to either join the Igsem or Remeon faction. You have to stand with me and become Torway's enemy, or join Torway and make a foe out of me."

Matthew and Haro's faces twisted from shock too. The vermillion haired girl chose to say it in a harsh manner even though it would upset them. She wanted to make sure they understood the situation, and not deprive them the right to choose.

"I do not wish to be enemies with anyone either… However, I won't expect that to happen. Because it would be troubling if I hesitate in making a move after getting betrayed."

Yatori said clamly. Yatori Shino Igsem steeled herself before anyone else, all ready to head to a new battlefield. Even though their relationship was going to change drastically, Matthew, Torway and Haro couldn't give any response— As the three of them had not come to any conclusion, they couldn't find the words to say to her:

"It's not expectations, Yatori. During times like this, we just need to hope."

The only exception was the dark haired youth who said what he already had in mind. Just like the vermillion haired girl, he came here with determination, without any wavering in his heart. Ikuta Solork accepted this heavy truth that he knew would come, and didn't falter.

Only now did Yatori turn her gaze to the dark haired youth… She was planning bid farewell without saying anything directly to him. Because there was no need to explain the situation to him, or urge him to steel himself. They knew everything about each other.

"… What a troubling request. For our [knight order] to remain the same in the future isn't something that I can pull off. What do we need to do to realize this hope? Pray to god?"

"There is no god, and even if He exist, he won't do anything… Hence, there is only one answer— [put your hopes in me]."

Ikuta declared as he looked straight into Yatori's eyes. He took a deep breath, pointed to the sun that was dropping beyond the horizon to the west— and said loudly:

"… Hold on that hope, Yatori! If you really hope for it, I will even pull that sun back up into the sky for you! If that is the future you yearn for, I will reach for it, even if it is at the end of the earth!"

"—"

Yatori opened her eyes wide as the youth continued to speak in an unscientific way.

"Even if that is not your wishes, I will hope for that on my own volition! No, from a long time ago, I have hoped for this! I have told you this before! My only wishes, is for you to live freely in a way you want!"

The vermillion haired girl understood what Ikuta wanted to say. He wasn't telling her that he understood the resolved both of them had to make, but that they should work harder towards their common goal— and not to give up hope, just because she had to steel herself. The last message that the youth conveyed to her made Yatori's completely controlled emotions waver intensely.

"C-Can I really hold on to this hope?"

The vermillion haired girl muttered and turned her back to the dark haired youth… Since she didn't have the confidence of staying calm, then she had to use this chance to bid them a final farewell. She walked towards the sun that was on the verge of setting, and increased her pace as if she was trying to shake off any hesitation.

The girl with dual blades never turned back as her figure disappeared as day turn into night.

"… What should we do, Ikuta? … What do we do now…?"

Matthew's helpless words broke the silence… He had always cautioned himself from over relying on his outstanding comrades, but at this moment, his mind was blank as he seek blindly for help. Torway and Haro felt the same as Matthew too.

Yatori left and the knight order had broken up. Depending on the situation, they might split even more. When they thought about that, even the ground below their feet felt like it was crumbling away—

"The three of you, listen to me─ I had already finished going through the process of thinking, worrying and anxiety."

In this chaotic bog, Ikuta's voice sounded firm and confident as usual. They rest their eyes on him, clinging on to any bit of hope.

"I don't have any options left. Aside from hoping, I have already braced myself. And now─ I'm going to drag the sun that had set back into the sky once more."

"Huh…?"

"First, we have to gather all the high ranking officers. I will get Her Highness, please use Princess Chamille's name to set things up with Major General Saba. If it is just once, he will probably accept the forceful use of royal authority. We might be doing this before getting permission, but that will be fine for now."

Ikuta said as he tapped of their shoulder one at a time. His tone was the same as always, but the aura around him seemed a little different. Haro was the first to realize that Ikuta was actually extremely tense.

"Ikuta-san, just what…?"

She felt a strange chill as she asked. The dark haired youth shook his head with a gentle smile:

"You will find out soon… Remember to prepare yourselves mentally. You will need to make a choice on what you want to protect, and what you want to be an enemy with─"

About an hour after Yatori parted ways with her comrades, officers with the rank of First Lieutenant and above all gathered at the large tent set up to the south of the Hioredo ore mines.

"What's going on…?""Why have all of us been summoned?""We will be attacking the ore mines soon, is it really fine for us to relax the encirclement?""Is this meeting related to the units being recalled back to the Empire─?"

The sound of the soldier’s discussion filled the venue. The tent itself could hold up to a hundred people, and since it was at full capacity, it felt really crowded. The long benches that were set up for this meeting were mostly filled.

"I-I think everyone’s here, when is that guy going to show up…!"

On the third row from the front, Matthew, Torway and Haro sat together. As they were the ones who approached Major General Saba and requested to gather all the officers, they were sitting on pins and needles. They hope whatever tricks Ikuta wanted to play would start as soon as possible.

The three of them returned their gazes to the front, and could see the figure of Major General Saba sitting two rows in front of them. He had a stiff expression as usual, and didn’t seem to have any opinion about the situation yet. Sitting in his row were Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels, and behind them were Major Sazarf and Major Melza who looked on uneasily. Especially, Sazarf who was worried about what his subordinates were trying to pull off.

"…! He’s here!"

As the crowd waited anxiously, the person who requested for this meeting appeared. Unlike the other soldiers, Ikuta came in from the back door. He looked at the group that made this large tent look cramped and nodded, then stood at the podium in front of the first row bench. The Princess was right behind him, and hugging Ikuta’s partner Kusu for some reason.

"Is that guy from the [Knight Order]…?""Her Highness has graced us with her presence…""Why is a mere First Lieutenant ignoring his superiors and standing on the podium?""Is this meeting his idea?""What is that brat thinking?"

The content of the rowdy discussion changed, and voices admonishing Ikuta were growing louder. This was expected for

calling a sudden meeting, but the subject himself wasn't fazed by the prickly gazes on him. Instead, it was Kusu who was in Princess Chamille's arms that felt this awkwardness on his behalf.

The dark haired youth stood beside the Princess, swept her gaze across the crowd, then said slowly:

"From the very start, we have been fighting a meaningless war."

The moment he said that, most of the hundred soldiers gathered turned paled. If he was trying to seek instructions with his speech, then his opening line was a failure… However, the youth didn't falter, and was even gleeful about getting the attention of his audience.

"The eastern territories was abandoned to concealed the fact that the administration failed to develop this area. Lieutenant General Rikan who was originally tasked with the defence of this place was offered as a sacrifice to appease the citizens, so they can accept this outcome. He fell in the battle against the Kioka army as if it was predestined. The land they failed to developed were discarded as if it was never part of the Empire, and the Empire lost an exemplary general, many competent staff and countless brave soldiers."

Ikuta said in a tone that didn't seek resonance with the audience, and appeared calm instead. How to draw the attention from a hostile crowd— the youth did that with his instinct.

"And now, we have once again come to the eastern territories we had sacrificed so much to abandon. Because of the imperial edict to take back the Hioredo ore mines. [We threw it away because it's a pain, but on second thought, we still need it, so go and take it back]— that's the main gist of the edict. It might sound cute for a kid's opinion of a toy, but the one who said that is actually some old aristocrat; and the thing discarded like a toy and asked to be retrieved, is the territory of a nation with ten million citizens. Is this not a laughing matter? But other than laugh, there's no other way to react—"

"Watch your tongue! Criticizing the edict is Lèse-majesté!"

One of the field officer sitting in front roared, and Ikuta looked at his face from the podium:

"… That's right, I know. Using [Lèse-majesté] as an excuse to suppress your unhappiness and stop thinking about it─ that's part of everyone's job here. No matter how unscientific this action might seem, it's hard to criticize it. Because everyone here acts correctly as soldiers, even if doing so doesn't have any future."

"How dare you…!"

"Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan lost his life because of this [correctness]. He is too noble as a soldier, and even accepted the edict that ordered him to die… He can actually be a little more selfish. Even if he ignored that order, and get branded a coward─ I still hope that he can continue to live on, just like everyone present."

The rowdy tent suddenly turned silent. Ikuta hung his head low and clench his fists tight:

"… Just how long are you all planning to keep this act up?"

He cast away his prepared speech, and said through his trembling lips─ this was the end of his carefully crafted monologue, as strong and intense emotions spilled out from the youth's mouth:

"Obeying those splurging and toying with our nation's resources unconditionally; but ignore the people who put their lives on the line to fight for our nation…! This type of respect is only as good as dog food! Heck, even the dogs will hurl it out and bury it with sand! Because unlike you, dogs are sensitive to the smell of rot!"

"T-That is sophistry…!"

"Sophistry? Which part of my words is sophistry!? The raison d'etre of soldiers is to protect the lives and property of the citizen, and maintain peace, correct? Even if we spend all this effort in taking

down one ore mine, what can we protect? Nothing! The things we risk our lives to achieve will just be tossed aside nonchalantly by the aristocrats again! Everyone knows about this foolish cycle! So think this through, right here, right now!"

"That's going too far, First Lieutenant!""This is treason! Arrest and court martial him!"

The youth's speech was too extreme, inciting strong protest and rebuttal from the soldiers. The members of the Knight Order and Sazarf couldn't mediate for him either, and could only look on with green faces. But just before his voice got drowned out by this oppressive tide, Ikuta unveiled the brutal truth:

"It's too late now! While we are messing around here, the coup is already happening— a coup by General Remeon!"

The moment they heard these words, half of the sound of the angry voices turned into shouts of panic. As the anxiety spread, their eyes fell on the commander-in-chief seated at the front row:

"Major General, what the First Lieutenant just said—""T-That's nonsense, right? How can this be…!"

Major General Saba didn't answer the questions that was asked by the men clinging on to this last bit of hope… His staff officers were the only ones who knew about the coup, and he could still insist that this was just a rash and baseless conclusion by Ikuta. This was just delaying the inevitable release of this news, but sometimes, this was necessary in order to maintain order within the group. For the Major General, this was the most realistic option— but before he choose this option, there was something that bothered him:

"…First Lieutenant Ikuta Solork, I just want to confirm one thing. What's your goal in gathering all of us here?"

Major General asked the youth on the podium with a deep voice, and also contained an implied message— are you inciting the soldiers here to support General Remeon's coup?

If that was so, then to Major General Saba, this was a foolish and reckless act. Ikuta Solork lacks too many qualities to convince the high ranking officers to join in with his revolt. Even with the backing of the Third Princess, his exemplary performance in the northern territories, and the fame of the Knight Order, it was still nowhere enough.

At this point in time, an option available to Major General Saba was to neither join the Igsem nor Remeon faction. He could hold onto his command of this army, and watch from the sidelines until the conclusion of the coup. General

Telshinha Remeon chose to start his coup right now, because he was certain that Saba will choose this path

. Staying neutral— that was the conclusion of the man who expected nothing from either factions.

"My goal is to let everyone know the choices available to them."

The Major General felt disappointed as the answer was within his expectations. However, Ikuta wasn't finished:

"I don't want to join the pro establishment Igsem faction unconditionally, or the revolutionary Remeon faction— but to present a third choice to everyone here."

"… What did you say…?"

Major General Saba felt a tremor in his heart as he silenced the protest of the other soldiers, and waited for Ikuta to continue. The youth before him closed his eyes in deep thought, and took several deep breaths:

"… Phew…"

After a long period of time, Ikuta opened his eyes─ and started to speak:

"─ In the past, there was a general in the Empire."

The youth’s voice rang out solemnly in the silent hall. Matthew, Torway, Haro and Sazarf all listened tensely.

"In the beginning, that man was treated like garbage. His physical abilities wasn’t up to par, he lacked the drive and would trouble his lecturers during tactics class with weird opinions. His appearance was mediocre too, and was far from being dignified or intimidating. Because of that, he was given the nickname of [Day Lantern], mocking him for being useless. That was to be expected."

Ikuta said slowly. The image of that mind slowly took shape in the soldiers’ mind.

"If this was a peaceful era, that man will probably remain as a useless day lantern. But he wasn’t that lucky, and was cast into the chaos of war to serve his obligation as a soldier. That man was assigned to the reserve force and wasn’t despatched in the beginning. But when the situation deteriorate one-sidedly, they lost many capable superiors and colleagues. Of those that remained, two of them were exemplary soldiers, Solvenares Igsem and Telshinha Remeon who were both still Second Lieutenants back then. They didn’t give in to the trying circumstances and fought bravely, but they were Company grade officers who couldn’t give their opinion on the strategic level. No matter how many local victories they secured, they couldn’t turn the tide on the grand scheme on things. The two talented men were slowly forced to the brink, and moments before a major enemy offensive, they resolved themselves to go down fighting to their last─ at this moment, on the dark battlefield filled with despair, a light that everyone had forgotten about shone brilliantly."

The situation changed abruptly. Everyone knew who Ikuta was referring to. They looked at the people besides them anxiously as they

thought back hesitantly─ after that person passed away, it was taboo to even mention his name by accident. The memories of that hero, and his very existence had been sealed away and branded as a "war criminal".

"That man suggested a plan that anyone with common sense wouldn't even consider. Most of the soldiers either laugh it off or objected vehemently, but the two soldiers I mentioned earlier saw the potential in this plan. They executed this plan despite the protest of the others, and the few thousand men who were seemingly doomed withdrew back safely to their allies. The man then said unhappily to the soldiers who looked as if they just saw a ghost─[Didn't I tell you that this will work]?"

Ikuta suppressed a wry smile and continued:

"With this incident as the turning point, that man became the allies of Solvenares Igsem and Telshinha Remeon. The two of them belonged to different factions, which prevented them from becoming too close, but they slowly deepened their friendship through that man. Seeing the two men destined to lead the two biggest factions in the military chatting and playing chess idly in the break room was an incredible sight. And that man was always together with them. He insisted on addressing them as [Sol] and [Tel], even though neither of them like that nickname. As he refused to stop, in the end, the two subjects themselves started addressing each other with these nicknames too."

As the youth droned on, he felt the corners of his lips relaxing. A vivid scene appeared before him, as if he was seeing the interaction between the three of them that happened so long ago.

"The friendship between the three deepened, and that man had more chance to perform. After gaining the position to present his views on the strategic level, he displayed his deep intellect. From operation planning, manpower deployment and setting up supply lines─ that man's proposals had an revolutionary charm to them.

By that time, no one referred to him sarcastically as a Day Lantern anymore. Those who were rescued by him from dire straits even compared him to the brilliant rising sun that chased away the despair of the long night. He was respected by his colleagues, viewed highly by his superiors, and had two outstanding subordinates serving under him. The two subordinates, Hazaaf Rikan and Kubalha Saba, were young soldiers and filled with drive. They followed that man closely and in the future, they were called the [Twin Jewels of the Sun]."

Ikuta said as he looked at the commander-in-chief before him. His face was no longer tense from unhappiness and resignation. Major General opened his eyes wide and waited with bated breath for Ikuta to continue, and what was to follow.

"That man climbed the ranks at amazing speed and was soon given command of a regiment. His unit built a base camp at the border of the nation, and was asked to contribute greatly for defence and offence, and he was able to perform as requested. When the troops got caught in a dire situation in the front lines, they were confident that man would send reinforcement, and was resolute in their resistance─[Don't give up! No matter how dark the night might be, the dawn will always come. We have the sun on our side]─ They would spur each other on with these words."

At this moment, the youth reached into his chest pocket, and signalled with his dark eyes to his partner in the Princess' arms. The girl took a sharp breath when she saw his gaze, then moved to the front most edge of the podium. From this carefully selected angle, she aimed the "Light Cavity" of the luminous sprite Kusu towards a spot slightly in front of the youth.

"The dawn will always come. I like this phrase as it is based on the scientific fact of astrology."

He slowly pulled out the hand from his uniform, holding the evidence in his right hand firmly before him─ at the exact same time, Kusu shone onto the object in Ikuta's hand.

What the soldiers saw was a silver artifact that could be held just barely with one hand. It was octagonal, with arrowheads decorating its edges. It was obviously related to the military, but when it was illuminated by the light, it had a completely different appearance.

"— Ahh— Ahh…"

Major General Saba's body started quivering uncontrollably as he witnessed the miracle happening before him. The silver artifact and the arrowheads pointing outwards basked in the light of the Sprite— and shone brilliantly like the sun at daybreak.

"Ikuta Sankrei, son of General Bada Sankrei, hereby declare..."

The youth announced this fact. He had discarded his past and many things, and was now steering the rudder guiding the course of his life at this very moment— Ikuta knew there was no turning back, but he didn't hesitate. He will cast aside anything that might bind him, and chase after that vermillion haired girl.

"The sun that had set after my father's death shall rise again— the dawn has come. Come, this is the chance for us to shine! Warriors who roamed the battlefield under the peerless imperial general in the past. The strongest military force in the world— the Independent Imperial All Territories Stronghold, the [Rising Sun Regiment]!"

With the light shining from the sun in his right hand, Ikuta gave this order to the veteran soldiers in front of him. Everyone who used to know Bada Sankrei could see the shadow of the late general from the youth standing before them—

Princess Chamille witnessed the youth revealing his trump card from up close.

"— Ah— Solork…"

The Princess could only watch with bated breath at this scene… She already learned that Yatori had been recalled because of a coup in

the Empire; and that Ikuta needed to seize command of this army to breakthrough this situation. The Princess knew that this would be considered a revolt, but she didn't have any grounds to reject him. This wasn't just a problem with Yatori, the Empire was heading towards destruction in the worst way possible.

She had been tasked to lit up Ikuta's hand with Kusu, but the Princess didn't even know that such an emblem existed. And even if she knew ahead of time, she would have never expected this to happen— that Ikuta would try to recruit the soldiers left behind after his father's death in such a bold manner.

The tent fell into confusion. In the nearly hundred officers present, almost a quarter served under Bada Sankrei in the past. Those who didn't had all worked under Hazaaf Rikan or Kubalha Saba in the past. This was only natural since the legacy of Bada Sankrei and his subordinates lived on, even if he himself had passed on.

"Ikuta, s-so you are…""Ik-kun, you—"

The three members of the Knight Order were also caught up in the confusion. They didn't know the relationship between General Bada and Ikuta, so they were more surprised than the Princess.

"…Ikuta Sankrei… You are… That boy from that time…"

Major General Saba got up from his seat and took unsteady steps towards the dark haired youth, and the gazes of the soldiers all fell on them— that's right, their commander-in-chief would be the one to decide how they would handle this situation.

"Yes, sorry for greeting you so late, Uncle Saba. We have met a few times in my old house, right? I remember playing with you before."

"Yes, I remember… But I never thought we will meet again like this… No, we have already met…"

"To be frank, if not for this coup, I have no intention of admitting my lineage… But never mind, there's no turning back now. I have to give up on all those things, and shamelessly use the fame of my father to recruit everyone here to my cause."

When he heard how Ikuta was going for broke, Major General Saba pressed his hand onto his forehead with an expression that was somewhat like a smile. His stiff face was on the verge of collapsing as he tried his best to maintain his dignity and asked his opponent with a quaking voice:

"… That third choice you mention? Not joining the Igsem or the Remeon factions, then what do you have in mind…?"

"To be the mediator that arbitrate between them, of course. Isn't that obvious? If this goes on, no matter which side wins, the Empire will be done for. The direct confrontation between these two factions would cause incalculable damage to the Empire. We must stop them before it comes to that."

"That is as good as performing magic… You think you can pull it off?"

"Magic? Don't be ridiculous, I will do things in a scientific way─Oh, please remember this conversation we had. Because after everything is over, I want to say─[Didn't I tell you that this will work]?"

Mimicking his father's words dealt the final blow, breaking through the impregnable "Insignificant" defence.

Pfft

… Air escaped from the corner of Major General Saba's lips. As if all the melancholic feelings he was holding back over the years was spewing out in one go, he started to laugh maniacally:

"Fuahahahahaha! I see, that’s right! This is interesting! Interesting! Fuhaha! Hahahaha!"

His laughter echoed in the tent. The man called the "Twin Jewels of the Sun" in the past had always eased the worries of his comrade with his hearty laughter. Kubalha Saba has returned for real.

"─Hey, are you seeing this, Haz!? You are missing out on this because you are too eager to die! The dawn is breaking over the seemingly unending night! How delightful! Looks like it’s too early to dismiss the world for being too boring!"

The Major General looked up into the sky through the tent, and reported the good news to his friend in the heavens─ Before this, he was ready to just sit by and wait for the meaningless fighting to end. But now, he had no reason to hesitate anymore.

"I have acknowledged your order to muster the regiment, Ikuta Sankrei-san. Can you give me around ten minutes to ready the men?"

"You can take one hour, but the condition is, you have to convince all of them. Take note of the officers who are leaning towards the Remeon faction, and separate them from the regiment if necessary. I don’t want to get stabbed in the back."

"Fuhahaha! You don’t hold back at all! I understand, and will carry out your orders!"

Major General Saba answered cheerfully, then returned to his unit. The three members of the Knight Order and Sazarf rushed to Ikuta’s side, as if they were trading places with Saba.

"D-Did we succeed…?""How should I put this? Erm… well…"

They went to him, but the four of them weren’t sure what to say. The dark haired youth showed a steady smile as he lowered his head in apology:

"— Sorry for hiding this from everyone. Like I said earlier, Bada Sankrei is my father. This emblem is keepsake from my father. I only kept this with me before this war broke out in case of a situation like this arises."

"You are hiding such an amazing trump card… Speaking of which, you have really done it now, this is not too different from starting a second coup, right? If you are court martialed, you will definitely be executed. You understand that, correct?"

He was surprised by the situation, but Sazarf still cautioned Ikuta as an elder. Ikuta was sincerely thankful of that, and nodded:

"I have already resolved myself, so did the Princess— but I would like the four of you to make your own choices. So, will you follow me? Or not?"

Ikuta offered them the choices as he looked at them in the eye one by one. He started off with Torway:

"Torway, I think you understand that your position is the most complicated out of all of us. Since General Remeon sent you out of the way before starting the coup, he probably won't tell you anything before this entire mess is over."

"…… Yes…"

"You can choose to stay neutral, or join General Remeon's faction to fight. The latter means you will be enemies with Yatori, so I will definitely advise you against that— however, it will be somewhat deceptive to persuade you to join me. My goal is to intervene with the coup and arbitrate the matter, and a real battle will be the last resort. However, there is still a high chance that a battle will break out, and we will definitely face off against General Remeon in some manner. Can you accept it if such a situation happen?"

Ikuta shifted his gaze away from the silent youth who couldn't give an immediate answer, and looked at Matthew.

"Matthew, your position isn't easy either. If you join the revolt, you will definitely drag the entire Tetzirich house with you. No matter what my actual actions might be, we will still be rebels in name. You won't have any excuses if you are tried for this. Please remember that carefully."

"… Ughh!"

The slightly pudgy youth bit on his thumb as he fell into deep thought. Ikuta left him alone for now, and looked towards Haro.

"Haro, your situation is similar to Matthew. You have five younger brothers back home, correct? If what worries you the most is your crime dragging down your family, then you should not follow me. In any case, joining either the Igsem or Remeon faction will be risky too, so please think about this carefully."

After hearing that, Haro hugged her own shoulders. Ikuta finally turned to Major Sazarf, crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side:

"Major Sazarf… Erm… Can you act as the mastermind like the last time?"

"What the hell are you saying, asshole! I feel like an idiot for waiting so seriously for my turn!"

"Sorry, I was just joking. Because it feels weird to ask someone who cautioned me out of good will to consider his options carefully… Never mind, don't overthink it, just make your decision normally. No matter what choice you make, you will always be the best superior I ever had."

Ikuta said with a wide grin, and Sazarf averted his face bashfully. After speaking with the four of them individually, Ikuta said to the entire group:

"Okay… Up until now, I have given you advise for your best interest, so anyone who wish to join me will not regret it— and now, I will move on to the main topic, which is what I really feel."

Ikuta started with that opening speech, took a deep breath, then bowed with his palms together in a pleading posture.

He raised his head slightly and said with an awkward smile:

"—Sorry, please help me, everyone. I was too cocky and escalated the whole thing too much. I can't do this properly on my own."

The dark haired youth didn't care about his pride as he bowed and pleaded desperately to his comrades. After a long silence, while Ikuta refused to move before getting a reaction, the four of them couldn't hold back their laughter:

"Ha… Haha…! A-After all that big talk… You are now telling us this…!"

"Hmm… That's right… Haha, that's just like Ik-kun…"

"You can still make us laugh at a time like this… As expected of our Ikuta-san!"

Matthew, Torway and Haro all forgot about their troubles and had a good laugh. Even after the dark haired youth made his real identity public, he was still the Ikuta Solork they knew.

"What a troublesome fellow. At the very least, tell your elders what you really think! I don't understand the full picture yet, but you are short on manpower right now, correct?"

Sazarf sighed as he said that, and the four of them exchanged glances. It was clear from their interaction that they had all reached the same conclusion.

"— I have decided. It can't be helped since you are asking so nicely. We will help you, so be grateful!"

Matthew declared on behalf of everyone. The moment he said that, Ikuta charged forth and hugged him by the neck.

"Ohhh, my dear friend～!"

"Uwahhh! Don’t hug me, that’s disgusting! Torway, take over for me!"

"Ohhh, my Haro～!"

"Hyaa! Why are you coming this way! P-Please save me, Major～!"

Ikuta only give his passionate hugs to specific targets. The Princess couldn’t stand his frivolous behaviour anymore, and walked into the group to kick Ikuta’s butt, sending him flailing. She didn’t hold back as this was done on reflex, which made the youth jump in pain. Matthew whistled impressedly:

"Uwah, that’s a fantastic kick, Your Highness. Oh, since Yatori will be away for a while, can you take over the role of punishing him when he gets too cocky?"

"… Huh? Ah… Well, I…"

"I agree. As his senior, I can take care of that too, but for some reason, I tend to be too heavy handed. However, I will teach him a lesson if he lays a hand on Major Melza."

Princess Chamille stood stiffly as they included her in the conversation so nonchalantly. A while later, she realized that she had become a part of the warm group again.

"That hurts… I stand by my protest against the violent treatment of my butt and other body parts. From the looks of things, your mood has improved a little, Princess?"

"… S-Solork……"

"It's better to change your habit of closing your heart to the world whenever you face any adversary. Humans will tend to get worked up over nothing when they are left alone… But that's fine, I'm not planning to leave you by yourself either. From now on, no matter where you might hide, I will charge in to get you."

Ikuta nursed his butt with both hands as he whispered to the girl. His warm words filled the Princess with glee. Before she could wipe it away, her tears started rolling down her cheeks.

"Yes, I know, I already expected you to cry at this juncture. After all, I'm a man who will learn from his mistakes."

Ikuta knelt down beside the girl, took out a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped away her tears. But her tears didn't stop and gradually drenched the handkerchief. The youth accompanied the girl patiently, and whispered to her again:

"… Everyone will make the mistake of saying something we don't mean to someone we hold dear. Just apologize properly to Yatori when you see her again. I will go together with you, you can definitely make up with her."

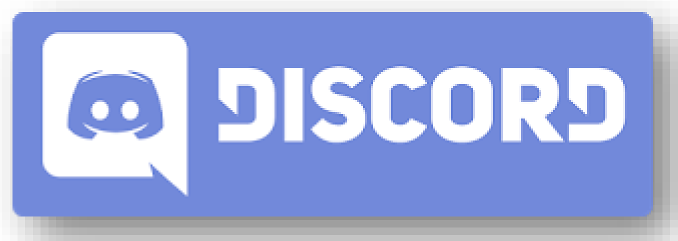
"… Yes…"

The Princess felt the gentle movement of his fingers through the handkerchief as she kept nodding… At this moment, a different kind of guilt was squirming in the girl's heart.

She wanted to meet Yatori around and apologize to her. She wants to make amends with Yatori and let Yatori comb her hair. Even though she sincerely hoped for this, another side of her thought—

if possible, I want to stay this way.

In the world without the vermillion haired girl, she hopes Ikuta Solork would always keep his eyes on her.


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